

God Is Love

1 John 4:7-12

Introduction: 1) Love, it has been said, has many faces. People see it in all sorts of shapes and sizes. I think it is interesting to note that sometimes we see it more clearly, not through the eyes of adults, but through the eyes of children. A group of professionals posed the following question to a group of 4 to 8-year-olds:

“What does love mean?” The answers they got, as one researcher said, “were broader and deeper than anyone could have imagined.”

“Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.” Chrissy – age 6.

“Love is what makes you smile when you’re tired.” Terri – age 4.

“Love is when my mommy makes coffee for my daddy and she takes a sip before giving it to him, to make sure the taste is OK.” Danny – age 7.

“Love is what’s in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.” Bobby – age 5.

“Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, then he wears it everyday. Noelle – age 7.

“Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day.”

May Ann – age 4.

“When you love somebody, your eyelashes go up and down and little stars come out of you.” Karen – age 7.

“You really shouldn’t say “I love you” unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget.” Jessica – age 7.

“When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn’t bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That’s love.” Rebecca – age 8.

“‘Love’ as seen by Frank Pittman and a bunch of kids”

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2) Well, it is one thing to get a child’s perspective on love, but it is even better to get God’s. Several times in the Bible God gives us His thoughts on love. We find it in Song of Songs 8:5-14, 1 Corinthians 13, and here in I John 4:7-21. John has addressed the subject of love already in 2:7-11 as an indication one is walking in the light and in 3:11-24 as evidence one is a child of God. Yet it is here, in 4:7-21, that he provides his fullest treatment. As he calls us aside to talk about this subject that some say, “makes the world go round,” John will take us to the very origin and source of love, God Himself. In fact love is His very nature, and acting in love is His essential character. How do we know? The cross! The cross of Golgotha is an everlasting monument to the truth that our God is love.

I. Love has its origin in God 4:7-8

1) The word love (Gr. *Agape*) dominates 1 John 4:7-5:3. It appears over 30 times. Some have even said John is the expert on the subject. Paul is the apostle of faith. Peter is the apostle of hope. James is the apostle of good works. And John is the apostle of love.

2) There is little doubt we need an expert on love. In our culture love is too often understood in selfish and sexual terms. The Word of God paints a completely different picture. Here the words sacrificial and supernatural jump out at us. Ultimately love comes from God and is seen most clearly in the death of Jesus on the cross as He takes on Himself the sins of the world.

3) Now we need to be clear. We are not saying lost people, non-Christians, cannot love. Sadly, they sometimes love better than some Christians do.

This should not surprise us. Never forget all persons are made in the image of God. All persons, in spite of their depravity and sinfulness, will give reflections of the One whose image they bear. Further God's grace and goodness is shared, in some measure, with the whole of His Creation.

However, I believe that I. Howard Marshall is correct, "Human love, however noble and however highly motivated, falls short if it refuses to include the Father and Son as the supreme objects of its affections" (p.213).

Such love unfortunately fails to honor the greatest love commandment of all, the commandment to love God with all that you are (Matt. 22:36-38).

1) Loving others gives evidence we have been born of God 4:7

1) With tender affection once again (“Beloved,” “Dear Friends”, *HCSB*), John simply says to his spiritual children “love one another” a statement he will repeat twice more (4:11, 12). Sam Storms says “it occurs as an exhortation in 4:7, a statement of duty in 4:11, and as a hypothesis in 4:12” (*Enjoying God Ministries*, 11-3-06).

2) Why are we to “love one another?” The first reason John gives is this: “for love is from God.” Real love, true love, always has its source in God. And, whoever loves with a “God kind of love” gives evidence that they have been born of God. Regeneration, the new birth, being born again, unites spiritual dead, selfish hearts with the Lord God’s living, loving heart so that His life becomes our life and his love our love. (Piper, “The New Birth Produces Love”, 3-16-08). John Piper puts it really well, “love is from God the way heat is from fire, or the way light is from the sun. Love belongs to God’s nature. It’s woven into what he is. Its part of what it means to be God. The sun gives light because it is light. And fire gives heat because it is heat. So John’s point is that in the new birth, this aspect of the divine nature becomes part of who you are. The new birth is the imparting to you of divine life, and an indispensable part of that life is love. God’s

nature is love, and in the new birth that nature becomes part of who you are...When you are born again, God himself is imparted to you. He dwells in you and sheds abroad in your heart his love. And his aim is that this love be perfected in you. Notice the phrase “his love” in verse 12. The love that you have as a born again person is no mere imitation of the divine love. It is an experience of the divine love and an extension of that love to others.” (Ibid).

So love has its very origin and source in God and it is an evidence that we have been born of God and are a part of “the family of lovers.”

2) Loving others gives evidence we know God 4:7-8

- Not only do those who love with a God-like love give evidence that they have been born of God, they also demonstrate in an on going habit of life that they know God. It is not they know about God, they know Him intimately and personally as Father (3:1).
- If verse 7 is the positive affirmation, verse 8 is the negative warning, with an important addendum. If your life is not characterized by a God-like love, a love that even cares for its enemies, then you don't know God and by logical extension you have not been born of God. Why? “Because God is love.” John will say this twice (4:8, 16). It is the very character, essence and nature of

God to love. And, as we will see in verse 10, this means He seeks the best for others even at great cost and expense to Himself.

- It is God's nature to love (to give and sacrifice). That "God is love" complements other beautiful statements made about God's nature in the Bible.

- God is Spirit (John 4:24)
- God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29)
- God is light (1 John 1:5)
- God is true (1 John 5:20)

"God is love" does not equal "love is God" (a form of pantheistic thinking), any more than "grass is green" means "green is grass."

Love does not define God, but God does define love. There is a beautiful logic here.

- 1) God is love.
- 2) Those who have been born of God and know God are God's children.
- 3) God's children have God's nature.
- 4) God's children therefore will love.

Love's source is in God and as we love like God loves, we give evidence we are connected to the source. We demonstrate by a life of love that we know God.

II. Love is seen in the atoning death of Jesus 4:9-10

- 1) It is one thing to talk about love. It is something else to show love. The Christian God is not just a talking God. He is an acting God, a doing God, and a serving God.
- 2) Often I meet hurting people who are wondering, "Does anyone love me?" They have been abused, abandoned, betrayed, lied to, mistreated, and deeply wounded. You may be like this and you can barely ask the questions but still you do, "Does anyone love me?" "Will I ever be loved?"
- 3) The good news of the gospel provides a resounding "yes" to those questions. You are loved and will always be loved by a God who is love and who wants to shower you, deluge you, with His love. How do we know? He sent His Son. To make sure you do not miss it, he says it twice (4:9-10). God sent His Son for you and for me.

1) God sent His Son that we might live 4:9

- 1) "In this the love of God was manifest" (revealed, made clear, put on display), looks forward to what follows. And this love of God was put on public display "among us." We did not just hear about it, John

says, we saw it. We were eyewitnesses. Here is what we know:

“God sent his only Son into the world,” and He does so for this purpose, “so that we might live through him.”

2) God sent his only Son. “Only” translates a word (*monogenes*) used 5 times in the New Testament in reference to Jesus (John 1:14,18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). It means unique (HCSB “One and Only”), one of a kind. There was and is no one like this Son. One should hear the words of John 3:16 ringing in their ears.

3) God sent His Son from heaven because that is where he was, in eternal existence with His Father in loving communion through the Holy Spirit. Our God was not lonely in need of company. The Triune God has existed forever in perfect, loving community and communion. No, our God was not lonely, He was loving. He sent His Son into enemy territory, into a “world” of sinners on a search and rescue mission. He came looking for us even when we were not looking for Him.

4) And why did He come? He came “that we might live through him.” This world of humanity was dead with no life or hope (see Eph. 2:1-3). God sent His Son. This world of humanity was in rebellion

against its loving Creator. God sent His Son. This world of humanity was not looking for God and even hated Him. God sent His Son.

5) What does it mean to “live through Him?” It means to be born of God and to know God. It means to experience His love and share that love with others. It means enjoying fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It means to walk in the light, enjoy fellowship with one another, confess and receive forgiveness of sins, walk as He walked, abide in the Word and His will, know the truth, be confident at His 2nd coming, have victory over sin and so much more. What a life the Son provides.

2) **God sent His Son that He might die 4:10**

1) This is one of the most incredible and important verses in the Bible. It notes the initiative God took in loving us and it addresses the magnitude of that love in the gift of His Son.

- God did not send an angel He sent His Son.
- God did not send His Son to live He sent His Son to die.

And this was not an ordinary death. Nor was it simply the death of a martyr. It was the death of a Savior dying in our place and bearing our punishment.

2) “In this is love” again points to what follows. First, God loved us before we loved Him. In fact He loved us when we did not love Him. Second, He proved, demonstrated His love by sending His Son. Paul said something very similar in Romans 5:8, “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Third, God sent His Son to be the propitiation (NIV, “atoning sacrifice”) for our sins.

3) The word “propitiation” is a rich theological term and one of the most important in the Bible. It is used 4 times in the New Testament in the context of Jesus’ death on the cross and work of atonement:

Romans 3:25-“whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness...”

Hebrews 2:17 – “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”; 1 John 2:2, “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”; and here in 4:10.

The word means to turn away the wrath of God by means of an offering. In ancient pagan religions human worshippers made the offering to appease an angry deity. The New Testament knows

nothing of this. In Christ, God Himself made the satisfaction, the atonement, as He offered Himself in His Son. As 2 Corinthians 5:19 says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them...”

Propitiation teaches us that God personally hates sin.

Propitiation teaches us that sin is serious.

Propitiation teaches us the greatness of God’s love in which He provided the offering to turn His wrath away.

Propitiation teaches us the truth that Christ’s death satisfied the Father and was a substitution for sinners.

Propitiation teaches us that God’s holiness required satisfaction, and that God’s love provided satisfaction.

John Stott says just right in his classic work on the atonement, *The Cross of Christ*, “It is God himself who in holy wrath needs to be propitiated, God himself who in holy love undertook to do the propitiation, and God himself who in the person of his Son died for the propitiation of our sins. Thus God took his own loving initiative to appease his own righteous anger by bearing it his own self in his own Son when he took our place and died for us.” (p.175).

Tim Keller reminds us, “The gospel is that Jesus lived the life you should have lived and died the death you should have died, in your place, so God can receive you not for your record and sake but for his record and sake.”¹

And Stott again would add, “For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be.”²

B. F. Westcott, simply but powerfully notes, “Nothing superficially seems simpler than forgiveness, whereas nothing if we look deeply is more mysterious or more difficult.”³

III. Love is perfected in us when we love others 4:11-12

1) It is too often the case that Christians are not known for their love of others. Sometimes the criticisms are unjustified. Unfortunately at other times, we are guilty as charged. Recent research by Gabe Lyons and David Konnamen reveals we are often seen by the lost as “hyperpolitical, out of touch, pushy in our beliefs, and arrogant.” In particular we are viewed by

¹ Tim Keller, “Keller on Preaching to a Post-modern City II: Preaching to Create Spiritually Inclusive Worship”; http://www.redeemer2.com/themovement/issues/2004/august/postmodernity_2_p3.html.

² John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1986,), 160.

³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 110.

young Americans who do not attend church as antihomosexual (91%), judgmental (87%), hypocritical (85%), and insensitive to others (70%).

[James White, *The Church in an Age of Crisis*).

2) And yet Jesus said love for others is how people know we are His disciples (John 13:35). And, He says to love our enemies and pray for those who hate us and would harm us if they could (Matt. 5:44).

3) Great and challenging application: Go to those who don't want you there. Share a gospel they don't want to hear. Love those who may hate and even kill you in return. Because you are connected to Jesus thru the new birth, go and live like Jesus among your friends and your enemies.

1) God's love for us inspires us to love others 4:11

1) When we were in darkness God sent His light. When we were dead God sent His life. When we were in sin God sent his Son. When we were in despair God sent His love.

2) For the 2nd time in this passage we are addressed as "Beloved" or "Dear Friends." John is not transitioning to a new subject this time. Rather, he wants to build on and add to his previous words in verses 7-10. He uses a common "greater to lesser" argument. Let me paraphrase: If God so loved and He does (just look to the cross of

Christ), then we ought naturally, out of gospel gratitude and connection to the source of love itself, God, love one another.

John 17:26 is extremely helpful at this point. There Jesus says, “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” Later, in 1 John 4:13-16, John will address more fully the beautiful Trinitarian component to this wonderful life of love.

3) When John says here “we ought” to love one another I think he means something like this: live out day by day who you are as those who are born of God, know God and have experienced the love of God in the sacrifice of His Son. We are simply experiencing and enjoying who we are in Christ when we love one another. After all, God’s seed is now in us (1 John 3:9) and God’s Spirit is now in us (1 John 3:24). Loving others is just what we do because the love that has rained down on us now fills us as we abide in Him.

2) **Our love for others brings His love to perfection 4:12**

This verse is striking and unexpected in its beginning. Literally it reads, “God no one ever has beheld.” The word seen is *tetheatai* (we get “theater” from it) and implies a careful observing, a close scrutiny or examination. No

person has see God “up close and personal” in His unveiled essence, glory and majesty. To do so would certainly be our death.

Moses on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 33:22-23) and Isaiah in the temple (Isa. 6) only saw theophanies, visions, or revelations of God. They could see and handle this (barely!) without being consumed. More than that and they would have been vaporized.

John’s argument, however, takes a beautiful turn. No one can see God in His essence, but we can see God through the lives of those who demonstrate His love to others. Stott again says it well. Mutual Christian love is the evidence that “the unseen God, who was once revealed in His Son, is now revealed in His people...when they love one another” (Stott, 164).

John makes his point by stating that when we love one another (1) it is proof God abides (5x in vs. 12-16) continually in us and (2) His love (God’s love for us/His kind of love) is perfected, brought to complete maturity. It reaches its intended goal.

John’s point: 1) I can love others like God loves me because He lives in me and 2) His love will reach its intended goal which is that I will love others like He loves me. It is a wonderful circle of theological truth that cannot be broken. After all, God is its source, its maintenance and it’s perfection. It is all of God from beginning to end.

Conclusion: 1) On June 25, 1967 over 400 million people in 26 countries watched, via satellite, the Beatles perform the song “All You Need Is Love.” They had been asked to come up with a simple song that could be understood by all the nations. So they gave us these words,

“All you need is love

All you need is love

All you need is love, love

Love is all you need”

2) While I believe their thesis was incorrect, I can understand theirs, and the world’s, heart cry. Why? Because it is very close to the truth. You see what we really need is the God who is love! To be precise, what we really need is Jesus who was sent by the God who is love. What we need is not to be connected to love, but connected to Christ, the source of love. And when that happens, real love, supernatural love, will flow like a river from Him, into you, and out of you to others. Then you will come to see and know for yourself the wonderful truth, “God is love.”