

“Love One Another”
1 John 4:7-12
January 28, 2024

INTRODUCTION:

We are beginning today a short sermon series on the “one another” commands of the Bible. My hope is that these seven sermons will serve to prepare us for a change our Session has approved for our adult Sunday School program. Basically, that change is to move from a topic-centered format to a community-centered format. There will still be teaching in these classes, and people will still be able to decide which Sunday School community they will join. But the Session has decided to use the Sunday School hour to strengthen our community life at gatherings smaller than our worship services and larger than our small groups. We believe this change of format will help in our shepherding of the congregation as well as in our ability to welcome new people into the life of the church.

We begin this series today with the one another command Jesus spoke so much about during his last days on the earth. Everything Jesus said should be taken to heart, but I don’t think we are wrong to emphasize those things he spoke about during his last days on earth. John seems to understand that and responds by giving emphasis to this area of love for one another. This is now the third time in his letter where he includes a lengthy section devoted to this theme of love for one another.

I. Love’s Source – v. 7-8

With his typical black and white clarity, John tells us that **“love is from God.”** He’s not referring to love in some general sense, but our love for one another. When John writes of our love for one another, he means our love for other Christians. Of course, we are also to love those outside the church, even those most opposed to our faith. Didn’t Jesus teach us to love our enemies? But John is speaking here about our love for other Christians, and this love, like all love, comes from God.

John states this truth with both a positive and negative statement. He starts with the positive, **“whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.”** The same is then stated negatively: **“Anyone who does not love does not know God.”** Before exploring these two statements in greater detail, we need to address a question raised by them. Does John mean to say that unbelievers are incapable of love? If so, that would seem to be contrary to our experience, for we all know those outside the church who seem to have a genuine love for friends and family. Something Jesus said seems to me to clear

this up. **“For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?”** (Matt. 5:46). Jesus acknowledges that unbelievers are capable of love, but then goes on to indicate that there is a type of love that is beyond natural, a supernatural love. I believe that is what John is referring to here. There is a type of love that is well beyond our ability, a love for those who are impossible to love in our own strength.

Are there people in the church who come to mind when you think about those difficult to love? Perhaps it’s someone who has hurt you in some way. Or maybe it’s someone whose political views are an irritation to you. It could also be someone who reminds you of your own sin because that person’s sin patterns are similar to your own. Love for that kind of person cannot come from within you but only from God.

The language John uses makes this clear. He says that only those born of God can love like this. Just as no one has control over their own birth, we have no control over being born of God. It comes from outside of us. John adds an important phrase that helps us see how being born of God helps us learn to love. He writes, **“whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.”** It is the knowledge of God that helps us learn to love. When John speaks of knowing God, he means more than an intellectual knowledge of doctrine. There are people who know a great deal of theology but are lacking in love for others. When John uses the word “know” here, he means something more akin to Genesis 4:1. **“Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain.”** It’s a word referring to intimacy. Here’s what this means for us. If you want to grow in your love for others, you will need to grow in your intimacy with God. Intimacy with God comes as we see more of the beauty of God. That’s where John takes us next.

II. Love’s Essence – v. 9-10

If we are to love one another, it is vital that we understand what love is. This is particularly important because our culture has reduced the meaning of love to a feeling. If you have warm feelings of well-wishing for someone, that’s the same as love. There’s also some confusion between love and lust. Lust is self-centered. If someone says, “I love ice cream,” they mean that they want to consume ice cream for their own pleasure. That’s not biblical love.

God is the standard for the kind of love John is talking about, seen in his statement at the end of verse 8, **“God is love.”** When John says “God is love,” he means that in his very substance and nature, God is love. There are three other “God is...” statements in the New Testament. God is “spirit” (John 4:24), “light” (1 John 1:1) and “a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29). It is God’s essence to be all these things. That means that he doesn’t just do loving things, but that

his love shines through in all he does. So, for example, when he judges, he judges in love. Since God's essence is love, and since this is the basis of our love for others, we learn from this that love is the essence of reality, and that love is the essence of being human. It is so important to get this straight. Our culture would teach us that we are essentially material in our essence, but that is both false and dehumanizing.

If we want to understand what it means to love one another, we must look to God's love as our standard and model. Thankfully, God's love is not hidden. John says that it has been **"made manifest,"** which means that it can be clearly seen. If you can answer the question, "How has God loved us?" then you can know how you ought to love others. John says it like this. **"God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loves us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."**

I note three components of God's love. The first one is that God loves by making a plan to love. In Peter's Pentecost sermon, he says that Jesus was **"delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God"** (Acts 2:23). Most worthwhile things in life require some planning. Weddings often require wedding planners. The need to fund retirement will often lead people to hire financial planners. People building houses do well to hire an architect to plan the entire project before a single shovel of dirt is turned. Love, which is far more important than any of these, also requires planning. What happens if you don't make a plan to love? Leaving it up to spur of the moment decisions makes us more susceptible merely to doing what we want to do. If we don't feel like doing something, we just don't do it.

Let's get more specific in our application. If love requires good planning, what does that look like? Loving others almost always requires either time or money from us, or both. One element of planning for you might be to carve out some margin for your time and money to be put to service in loving people. When the good Samaritan helped the needy traveler, it required both time and money from him. Perhaps the priest and Levite both failed to love him because they convinced themselves they were too busy. Important matters were pressing. In any case, the good Samaritan, whom Jesus offered as an example of what it means to love one's neighbor, was generous with both his time and money. So a step you might need to take is to sit down and look at your use of time and money and make a plan for any necessary changes that will free you up to love people.

A second feature of God's love is that he took action. Though God certainly has feelings of love, love cannot be reduced to a feeling but must move into action. Two actions are mentioned: the incarnation and the atonement. Let's start with the incarnation. God did something when he "sent" his Son into the

world. The clear implication of that word is that Jesus had an existence prior to being sent. None of us were sent into the world, but born into it. Jesus has always existed as the second person of the Trinity, fully God from all eternity. He was sent **“that we might live through him.”** Were it not for Jesus’ coming to this world, we would be dead. Consider what that means for you personally. If God had not acted to send his Son, we would all be hopelessly lost.

God’s second action that John mentions is the atonement, referred to by this word “propitiation.” It’s one of those key words of the Bible, and it means that Jesus, through his death, satisfied the wrath of God. The death of Jesus on the cross is the ultimate act of God’s love because of the high price he paid for it and because of the benefits it gave to those of us who believe in him. Jesus faced the horror of his coming crucifixion in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he was sent into such an agony that the mere thought of his approaching crucifixion caused him to sweat drops of blood. It wasn’t the physical pain of crucifixion that so horrified him, as horrible as that was. Rather, it was the prospect of broken fellowship with the Trinity itself as the Father turned his face away from Jesus. Jesus became sin in our place and he was forsaken instead of us. The result is that now God’s wrath has been satisfied. In his classic work, *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott has a chapter titled “Why did Christ die?” Toward the end of the chapter, he quotes Octavius Winslow summing things up like this. “Who delivered up Jesus to die? Not Judas, for money; not Pilate, for fear; not the Jews, for envy;--but the Father, for love!”

In a podcast I heard this week, Curtis Chang contrasted childhood and adulthood with this element of taking action. When a child in a household notices that there’s a leak in the roof, he will do nothing more than tell his parents, “There’s a leak in the roof.” But the adults in the household will take action. Are you someone who merely notes and complains about what’s wrong with the world, or are you someone who takes action? The actions can often be small things, but if our love is to be like that of God, action is required.

The third feature of God’s love is self-denial. The central question of self-denial moves from “What’s in it for me?” to “What good can I bring about?” God’s actions of incarnation and atonement were motivated by the good to be brought about by those actions, not by any benefit they brought to God himself. Consider just this phrase that God sent his only Son into the world. That was a costly action on several fronts. When Jesus was sent, he departed. There was a necessary separation involved in this. I remember the pain of our oldest child leaving home when he went to college, a pain that caused his little sister to cry all the way home, insisting that life would never be the same again. How much more pain would be experienced by the sending of God’s son into this evil and broken world! John often uses the word “world” in a negative sense, to describe this world in its fallen condition of rebellion against God. Imagine the contrast between Jesus’ home in heaven, with all its glories, and

the world into which he was born. He was born in the plainest of circumstances, to a poor mother and father, and in a stable that was more suited to animals than people. He was not well-received. The king of the land into which he was born responded by trying to murder him, missing him but slaying many other innocent children instead. As a result of this opposition, Jesus and his parents became homeless refugees in Egypt. The attempts to take his life didn't end with his infancy. Many times during his public ministry attempts were made on his life, until the final one succeeded. This is the world into which Jesus was sent. The only thing strong enough to make this happen was the mighty love of God. This is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us.

III. Love's Mission – v. 11-12

In these final two verses, John states again the command to love one another and then follows that with a reason for doing so. **“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.”** The love of God bears evangelistic fruit. How does that happen? John speaks of this by first stating a problem. “No one has ever seen God.” This God of exquisite beauty and love is invisible to people. If people could see what he is really like, if they could see the love of God through Jesus, they would draw near to him and love him. But they don't see that true God, and as a result of this lack of vision people believe all kinds of false things about our God. They believe he is uncaring or even cruel, unwise or maybe inept. But they don't see his true nature.

John has an answer to this problem that is the same as Jesus' answer. This answer is for God's people to love one another, and by doing so people will see something of the true love of God. We have the opportunity to be the incarnation of God's love in this world. People need to see this, and part of our mission is to show it to them by our love for one another. That's what Jesus meant when he said, **“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”** (John 13:35). It has always been the case that the love God's people have for one another has a powerful evangelistic effect. But it is even more the case today when this kind of love is growing more rare in our world.

CONCLUSION:

May you grow in your love for others as you grow in your grasp of God's love!