

“God Is Love” (John 4:7–21)

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“All You Need Is Love.”¹

“What the World Needs Now Is Love.”²

“You’re Nobody till Somebody Loves You.”³

“I Love You Just the Way You Are.”⁴

We hear a lot about love, particularly through popular songs. But, to quote yet another pop song (immortalized in a Saturday Night Live skit), “What is love?” How do we know what real love is like?

It seems that most people think of love as an emotion. When a lot of people say, “I love you,” it means, more or less, “I feel good when I think of you and when I’m around you.” That’s how it’s used in most love songs, which seem to be sung by young people who don’t really know what love is. Love in the popular sense is a feeling. It’s thrilling. It’s intoxicating. But that love comes and goes. It ebbs and flows, waxes and wanes. It arrives like a thunderbolt, but it can’t be conjured up at will.

Of course, that’s romantic love. Another type of love we think of is the love that parents have for their children. This love tends to mean, “I’ll do anything for you.” Often, it now means, “I’ll do anything that makes you happy.” It’s a sacrificial love, but it’s also an indulgent, pampering, coddling love.

But the love of God is different. The love that comes from God, and the love with which we should love each other, isn’t really a feeling. Having positive feelings is great. Having romantic feelings for a spouse is a good thing. There is certainly a place for romance in biblical Christianity—just read the Song of Solomon. But true love isn’t just feelings or romance. True love isn’t based on how lovable, or attractive, or kind the object of that love is. True love is action. It’s an action that seeks the welfare of the object of that love, even if that person doesn’t deserve anything good.

¹ John Lennon, performed by The Beatles.

² Lyrics by Hal David, music by Burt Bacharach, sung first by Jackie DeShannon.

³ Written by Russ Morgan, Larry Stock, and James Cavanaugh, performed by many singers.

⁴ Written and performed by Billy Joel.

Today, we'll consider what true love is by thinking about the God who is love. For some people, the only three words of the Bible they know are, "God is love." That's a statement made by the apostle John, one of Jesus' first followers. He writes that statement twice in the passage that we'll look at today, 1 John 4:7–21.

If you haven't been with us before, or recently, we've been reading a book of the New Testament called 1 John. It's a letter written by John to Christians in a part of the Roman Empire around the area of Ephesus, which is in what is now western Turkey. John wrote to these Christians because he wanted them to know that they know the truth about Jesus, the Son of God, who gives people eternal life (1 John 5:13). John wanted them to know the truth because there were people who had been in churches with these Christians and then had left. They left because they didn't believe the same message about Jesus (1 John 2:18–19). From what we can piece together from John's letter, these people didn't believe what Christians have always believed about Jesus, that he is the Son of God, that he truly is God, that he "came in the flesh" by also becoming a man, that he died on the cross to take care of our sins, and that we must obey his commands, particularly the command to love one another.

John has already told his readers—and us—that we must love one another because Jesus has commanded us to do that (2:7; 3:11). And we are told to love each other in a sacrificial way because Jesus laid down his life for us (3:16). Now we've given another reason why we should love one another: God is love.

Let's first read the whole passage together, and then I want to highlight three things that this passage teaches.

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world.

¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.⁵

Here's the first thing this passage teaches: God is love. Here is one of the most beautiful, profound ideas in the Bible. But since it's also misunderstood and misused, I want to spend some time clarifying what John does and doesn't mean.

John doesn't mean that God is only love, as if that's the only thing that we could know or say about God. But one of the most important things we need to know about God is that he is loving. He is the source and measure of love.

Verse 7 says, "let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God." Love is from God. And those who aren't loving don't know God, as verse 8 says, "because God is love."

It's important to observe that John doesn't say "love is God." If he did that, it would be even easier to distort who God is. We would think, "Oh, I know what love is." And then, we would think, "that's what God is!" In other words, we would base what we think we know about God on what we think we know about love. That's what we tend to do with God. We want to make him into an idea or a concept that we can define and control. We tend to think, "God must be like this," or, "God can't possibly be like that." We want a God made in our image. But John doesn't say "love is God." And he doesn't just say, "God is love."

John has something specific in mind. So, he continues in verses 9 and 10: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that 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 loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." How do we know that God is love? How has God's love been revealed? God sent his Son, Jesus, into the world, so that we could love through him. And how do we live through Jesus? Jesus was sent "to be the propitiation for our sins." What does that mean? The word translated as "propitiation" has the meaning of taking away our sin and making God favorable toward us. We can say that Jesus makes God favorable toward us by taking away our sin. And how does Jesus do that? He died on the cross.

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

So, how do we know God is love? He sent his Son to die in our place, to take all the sins that we have committed upon himself, and to be crushed by the wrath of God that our sins deserve. As the apostle Paul puts it, “For our sake he [God the Father] made him [Jesus, God the Son] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). We can be made right with God because Jesus himself, the precious Son of God, was regarded as sin and he was put to death.

That is love. Love is giving up the most precious thing you have to help the one you love. Love is sacrificial. It doesn’t take; it gives, and it gives everything. And, I should note that Jesus didn’t die against his will. This was his plan as much as it was God the Father’s plan. Jesus said, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father” (John 10:17–18). That, too, is love.

If we’re paying attention, we see that God’s love isn’t the kind of love that coddles us and says, “Whatever you want is okay, just have a good time.” God’s love isn’t opposed to God’s justice, God’s holiness, and God’s hatred of sin. Because God is love, he loves his creation. Yet sin destroys it. It corrupts what God made good. And because God loves his creation, primarily his people, he hates sin. He wants to eliminate it.

I have heard people say, “My God would never judge, because the God I worship is love.” That doesn’t make sense. God judges *because* he loves. And that’s what he did when Jesus died on the cross: he judged sin. At the cross, God judged all the sin of everyone who would ever come to Jesus and love him, trust him, and follow him. God hates sin that much that he would send his Son to pay for it. Jesus loves us so much that he would take that sin upon himself and die so our sin could die, too. That way, we don’t have to pay for our own sin. We don’t have to be judged for sin.

The truth is that all of us have sinned (Rom. 3:23). Everyone has ignored God. Everyone has lived as if God isn’t the center of our lives, the very purpose for our existence. Everyone has failed to live up to their own standards, let alone God’s perfect standards. At our worst, we don’t just ignore and neglect God. At our worst, we know God’s commands and we choose to disobey them. Our failure to live for God and love him, and our failure to love other people whom God has made, corrupts God’s good creation. Our sin destroys us from within.

But God is love, so he sent his Son to die so that we could live. Imagine this scenario: A building is burning because the people who lived there were foolish. Perhaps they didn't follow safety regulations regarding electrical plugs and there was an electrical fire. Perhaps they were trying to do something stupid like having a barbecue inside an apartment building. Regardless of the exact cause, it was their fault. And now a fire is raging inside the building and the people inside are trapped. They can't get out. They're passing out from smoke inhalation and they need to be rescued.

Now imagine being the owner of that apartment building, the landlord of these people. And let's say your tenants are terrible. They don't pay their rent on time. They damage property. They make noise and party and fight and the police are over there frequently. Now, you're standing outside the building, watching it burn. You're older, but your healthy, adult son is with you. If you say the word, he'll run into that burning building to save people. But you know that if he does that, there's a good chance that he'll die. Would you send him? If you loved those unlovable, foolish, disagreeable tenants enough, you would send your precious son to save them.

And that's what God does for us. He sends his Son into the burning building that is the world corrupted by sin. And he saves people who were his enemies, people who weren't lovable, people who didn't deserve to be saved. And, in this illustration, when Jesus saved everyone he wanted to save, the building collapsed and killed him. The Father knew this would happen, and so did the Son. But they did it anyway.

Jesus died for his enemies, for ungodly people who aren't loved because they're so good or adorable, but simply because God chose to love them. This is what the apostle Paul writes in Romans 5:6–11:

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.
⁷For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—⁸but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.
¹¹ More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

True love isn't that we love God. True love is that God loved us, even while we were sinners (verse 10). God loves us first. "We love because he first loved us" (verse 19). He chose

us and rescued us from the burning building of our sin when we couldn't rescue ourselves. He rescued us at great cost, by sending his one and only Son, who laid down his life for us so that God could destroy our sin without destroying us. That is love.

So, God is love. That's the first thing we should see in this passage. The second thing we should see is that God's love drives out fear of judgment. Look again at verses 17 and 18: "By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love." When John says that love is "perfected," he means that the love of God, which is already perfect in itself, has its effect completed in us when certain things happen. When we are confident that we will not be condemned by God on the day of judgment, then God's love has completed its work within us. We don't have to fear the day of judgment "because as he is so also are we in this world." This is hard to understand, but the he is surely Jesus. And it might mean that though we, Jesus' followers, are in this world, we are united to him. Though we are surrounded by temptations and though we fail time and again, we are united to Jesus, the one who went through this world but didn't sin. His righteousness is ours, so that if we're united to him, we don't have to fear the wrath of God.

If you truly are united to Jesus, if you know him, not just some facts about him, then you have nothing to fear. God's perfect love covers your sins. It drives out any fear of being punished on the last day. That doesn't mean we shouldn't fear God, but that has less to do with being afraid of God and more to do with properly respecting him. This also doesn't mean that God won't discipline his people in this life, perhaps through some hard times. "The Lord disciplines the one he loves" (Heb. 12:6; Prov. 3:12). But it means that we don't have to fear being cast out by God, being condemned by him on the last day. God loves his children. Remember the length that God went to rescue his children, to adopt them into his family. This God will not then disown his children.

So, God is love. God's love drives out the fear of punishment. And those who have been loved by God should love him, his commands, and his people. That's the third thing we should see in this passage. John spends the bulk of this passage dealing with this issue.

I have already said that love is from God. The ability to love is from God, too. Everyone who has been "born of God" loves. Those who are "born of God" are those who have been

transformed by God, who have received the Holy Spirit, and are united to Jesus. That means that God has made us into his children and changed our status and even our nature. At the beginning of John's Gospel, he writes this about Jesus:

¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:11–13).

Jesus makes those who come to him children of God, and they are born again because this is God's will. In John 3, Jesus says that to enter into the kingdom of God, one must be born again of the Holy Spirit. The idea is that to relate properly to God, God must first transform us, and one of the marks of someone who has been changed by God is that he or she loves. God is the source of love, and that love is evident in his people. To know God is to love God and to love his people. That's why John says, at the end of verse 7 and in verse 8, "whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."

The reason we can love others in a true way, to love people not because they deserve love, not because we expect something in return, not simply when we feel like it, is because God loves us that way first. Look again at verse 11: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." God has given us the perfect example of his love. He sent his precious Son to rescue people who didn't deserve it.

If we truly love God, then we'll love him and we'll love other people. When we love others, we know that God's love has taken root in us. Look at verse 12: "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." John returns to this idea of God not being seen in verse 20: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." Here's what John is getting at: we can't see God. Apart from his incarnation in Jesus, whom we haven't seen, he is invisible. He is spirit (John 4:24). But we can see other people who are made in God's image. If we can't love the people made in God's image, whom we can see, how can we love God, whom we can't see? Other people are right in front of us. It should be somewhat easier—at least easier to prove—that we love others. We should love them in our deeds, not just our words (1 John 3:18). It's a bit harder to demonstrate that we love God. We can say we love God, but we can't hug him or present gifts directly to him the way we can to

other people. How do we know that we truly love God? That usually comes out in the way that we love other people.

God's love is made manifest when we love others. We see God's love when we love other people and when we are loved by other people. God often sends his love to us through the kindness of other people. When others encourage you, help you with your struggles, and point you to Jesus, God is loving you through them. And we should do the same for others. True love is giving people what is best for them. When we help people thrive, we are loving them. And the best way to help love people is by pointing them to Jesus and reminding them of God's love for them. This kind of love is the mark of a Christian. "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Now, it would be easy to distort John's words here, just as we could distort his statement that "God is love." We could say, "whoever loves has been born of God and knows God" (verse 7), and then turn around and say, "See my friend, she's really loving, so she must be a Christian," even though in reality she doesn't know anything about Jesus and doesn't believe he is the God-man who died for her sins. John says more than "whoever loves has been born of God." That is *one* mark of a Christian, but it's not the only one. You see, in this letter, John stresses three categories of the Christian life. One category is love: love for God and love for other people, particularly fellow Christians. Another category is our behavior: we live, striving to follow Jesus' commands because we love him. But the first category is what we believe about Jesus. It concerns our faith. We can't be God's children if we don't know him, his Son, and his Spirit.

Look again at verses 13–16:

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

We know we live in God, and he lives in us, because we have the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of truth" (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). He leads us to know the truth about Jesus. Part of knowing God's love is knowing that he sent his Son to be the Savior. That he is "the Savior of the world" doesn't mean that everyone will be saved from their sin. It means that he is the only Savior that

this world has. No politician, no inventor or scientist, no businessman, no lover, and no artist or entertainer will save you from your sin. Only Jesus can, and to be God's child, you need to know God's unique Child, his Son. If you confess that Jesus is the Son of God who is sinless, died for your sins, and rose from the grave, and if you live like it, you can be assured that you have eternal life. You will "come to know and to believe the love that God has for" you.

Being a Christian means having a right relationship with God. If you have a relationship with God, you will know facts about God. But it won't just be knowing facts. You'll interact with him regularly. And if you truly know God, you'll obey him, because he is God. Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords, not just a friend and a brother. To know him is to trust him, love him, and obey him, even if imperfectly. We're not acceptable to God because we obey; that would go against what I've said about God rescuing us from sin and condemnation on the basis of Jesus' perfect life and atoning death. But once we're rescued, we live like God has rescued us. That is, we're grateful, and out of gratitude and love, we obey. And what does God command? Verse 21: "And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother."

So, what does this have to do with us? Let's think about our three points. The first is that God is love. We don't define "love." If you want to know what true love is, look to the cross, where God crushed the sin of everyone who will turn to Jesus. Don't say, "God would never say that such-and-such is sin, because God is love." That is redefining God's love. Love is not love is not love. God is love. And God also hates sin. We can't separate God's love from his holiness. So, please know that God is love, but also know what that means and what it doesn't mean. Don't use those three words as a license to sin.

The second point is that God's perfect love drives out fear. If you know Jesus, you've experienced God's love. You may not always *feel* God's love, but you have it. And if you truly know Jesus, there is no reason to fear. There is no fear of God's wrath. There is no fear of death. The author of Hebrews says that Jesus came so that "through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" (Heb. 2:14–15). And there shouldn't be fear in following Jesus. He may ask us to do some things that are a bit scary, but if we trust him, we shouldn't be afraid.

I think there is some fear in this church about making changes, changes that will make the church both more biblical and more able to reach out to younger generations and make

disciples. A lot of people are afraid of doing new things, even if what we're doing is being more aligned with Scripture. Our tendency is to look back to what we know from our own experiences. Our tendency is to want to do what is comfortable. Our tendency is to try to go back to the "glory days." But the Christian faith isn't just backward looking; it's forward looking. And following Jesus shouldn't make us afraid. We should be afraid *not* to follow Jesus. We should be afraid *not* to do become more aligned with Scripture. One of our ongoing challenges is to be able to distinguish biblical commands and principles from our own traditions and personal preferences. If we're truly loving God and others, we may have to set aside our personal preferences and our cherished traditions in order to be more biblical and to reach out to people who don't yet know Jesus.

The third point is that those who have experienced the love of God love God. And if you've been loved by God and you love him, you will also love his commands and his people. I think there are two ways to fail to fully experience God's love, and they both involve fear, but in different ways. One is by fearing God's punishment because we don't trust that Jesus' death on the cross has paid for our sins. When we rely on our own moral performance, we should be afraid of God's punishment, because all of us have fallen short of God's requirements. If you're afraid of condemnation, it's probably because you don't truly trust Jesus. You don't believe this gospel message that he alone saves you.

The other way to fail to experience God's love is by not fearing God. And what I mean here is is not having a proper reverence for God. Fearing God in this sense is not opposed to loving God. When we have a proper fear of God, we take his holiness and our sin seriously. We take the cost of Jesus' sacrifice for our sin seriously. The one who truly knows God and his love is thankful and loves God. Out of thanksgiving and love, we should obey his commandments. And we should love the people he loves.

I'll close with this: The marks of a Christian are loving God, confessing that Jesus is the sinless Son of God who died for your sins and rose from the grave, and loving other people. You don't do these things to become a Christian, but once you are a Christian you do those things. If that describes you today, I want you to think deeply about God's love. Let his love motivate you to love him and to love others more. His love should be so compelling that you say, "I will do whatever you ask."

If these marks of a Christian don't describe you today, you can know the love of God. It is not too late for you. I would urge you to pursue a knowledge of Jesus, to consider that he died to pay for our sin. No one else can and will do this. But Jesus did. God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son. Would you trust Jesus today? Don't shrug this message off. I would love to talk to you more about following Jesus. I would love to answer questions you might have. And I will testify that Jesus is our only hope in this life and in the next. Fear God, but don't fear his punishment. This is a God who will not refuse you if you turn to him in faith. No matter what you've done in your life up to this point, God is able and willing to forgive you and love you. Turn from your old ways of living and turn to Jesus. Then, you will also know the love of God and the God who is love.