

1 JOHN

Part 9: “The God Who Is Love”

1 John 4:7–21

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Sunday, August 13, 2023 (Ordinary Time)

Scripture Reading

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. 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. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 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. 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. We love because he first loved us. 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. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:7–21).

Introduction

There’s a familiar story from the Old Testament that I misunderstood for years. Moses has just led the children of Israel out of slavery in the nation of Egypt. The people of God have just witnessed more extraordinary miracles and displays of power than any generation in history. They have witnessed the ten plagues, the miracle of the Passover, and the parting of the Red Sea. But now they are alone in the wilderness before the foot of a mountain named Sinai.

Moses has ascended the mountain, where he has entered a thick cloud of smoke and darkness where God’s power and presence has come down from heaven to earth. Here, on Sinai, the Lord will give Moses the Law. The Law that Moses receives is more than just a list of rules and regulations. It is God’s very word. It is God’s self-revelation of himself so that his people might truly know him, worship him, and commune with him.

As Moses receives the Law of God, it is a scene filled with awe, holy fear, and divine glory. But at the base of the mountain, another very different scene plays out.

The people have grown impatient with Moses. He has been on the mountain for days and even weeks. Who knows what has happened to him at this point?

Several Israelites come to Aaron, Moses's brother [show [The Adoration of the Golden Calf](#)], and they demand that Aaron fashion an image for them to worship. In his fear and confusion, Aaron takes their precious metal and jewelry and sculpts a golden calf for them to worship. When the idol is revealed, people eat and drink and dance and indulge themselves before their self-made god.

Just then, Moses comes down from the mountain announcing that God's anger burns against them for this grievous sin.

And here is where I once misunderstood the story. For years, I was under the impression that the Israelites had simply forsaken the God who had just delivered them from slavery in Egypt. I thought that by making the golden calf, they had turned away from the Lord and to another god.

But that is not what happened at all. When the people beheld the golden calf, they exclaimed, "This is the Elohim—the Hebrew word for God—who brought us up out of Egypt!" After Aaron finished sculpting this idol, he built an altar before it and proclaimed, "Tomorrow there shall be a feast unto Yahweh the Lord!"

This was why God's anger was kindled against them. Their sin was not that they wanted to worship a new god. Their sin was that they wanted to worship the one true God on their own terms. They take what they believe to be true about the divine and impose it on the Lord. They desired to worship God for who they wanted him to be instead of who he had revealed himself to be. They wanted, expected, and made for themselves a version of God that suited their agendas.

But God will not be defined and confined by the imagination of man. He is holy and glorious and transcendent. He the Great I Am who reveals himself on his own terms.

I want to remind you of this story and the lesson it conveys because today, we just read one of the most crucial and important sentences in all of 1 John. This is the passage that teaches us that "God is love."

That sentence is not just a famous sentence in 1 John—it's one of the most famous sentences in the Bible within modern culture. In fact, this one little phrase is often quoted by Christians and non-Christians alike. And it is precisely because of the fame and familiarity of this quotation that makes it prone to misunderstanding and misapplication.

In fact, I would argue that outside of its biblical context, the phrase “God is love” is a dangerous saying. Why would I say that? Because love has become our culture’s golden calf.

When we hear the words "God is love," we often conjure our vision of love and then impose that definition onto God. The problem is our vision of love is often formed and malformed by the powers of our culture or the traumas of our past.

So the problem is not the idea of love itself. The problem is that we have very different understandings of love that conflict with one another. Even more, our understandings of love often conflict with the truth that is revealed in God’s word.

We have been conditioned to envision God in light of what we believe about love. But the word of God will instead show us a new vision of love and a new way of life in light of who God has revealed himself to be.

The Apostle John writes, *“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love”* (1 John 4:7–8).

Today, we are going to talk about what the phrase “God is Love” really means. And as we dig deeper into this passage, we come to know *“The God Who Is Love.”*

Exposition

1.) The God who is love has given us his Son.

The word "love" has a wide range of meaning. When we use the word in everyday speech, love means to highly regard, to cherish, to have affection toward. Love can refer to a romantic interest, yes. But we can also feel love for people who are our friends or family members. We can experience love for our pets and possessions. And in all these cases, love involves some level of desire or natural affection towards a person or object.

So, with that said, you can see how easy it would be to read or hear the words “God is love” and say, “Yes, I’m a loving person. I can think of several people that I love; therefore, I must be a good and godly person, unlike *those people* out there who are hateful and unloving.”

But just because we experience a sense of desire or affection doesn’t mean that our loves are good and godly. As the playwright once sang, “Love doesn’t discriminate between the sinners and the saints.” Even Hitler had a girlfriend, right?

No, our desires can be disordered and destructive. Our loves can curve inward toward ourselves in a way that leads us to sinful thoughts, words, and actions. What we call "love" is often a self-centered desire that is often self-serving in its end goal. Our loves can be self-interested, self-advancing, and self-protecting. The love of self is all about

what we can acquire and conquer and consume—and this leads us to an all too natural way of life that perpetuates brokenness and pain within ourselves and our world.

And it is against this backdrop of "red tooth and claw" desire that God reveals a new way to love. In Christ, God has shown us a love that is not self-protecting but instead self-sacrificing. God displays a love that is not self-absorbed but instead self-giving. It is a love that is costly, generous, and scandalously gracious. God's love is a love that gives of himself; it is the love that sent Jesus into our broken world so that we might be redeemed.

John writes, *"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. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another"* (1 John 4:9–11).

The word "propitiation" in this passage is a powerful word. It is a word that refers to blood sacrifice and atonement. It conveys that Jesus came to us to be more than just a teacher or a positive example. He has come to be our substitute and our redeemer.

In his death on the cross, Jesus takes upon himself our sorrow, our shame, and our sin, and he offers us the gift of his own righteousness. If we want to truly understand the nature of love, we must look to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Our culture has conditioned us to believe that it is normal to go through our lives frantically seeking our desires. Humanity has co-conspired together in building a way of life that is all about chasing our own comfort, convenience, material wealth, and fleeting pleasure. We want to be free to desire and acquire whatever and whoever we want, but such limited vision of freedom creates a type of bondage wherein we are enslaved to our desires.

In Christ, God has called us to a new way of life wherein we will find true freedom. Jesus shows us that it is only when we die to self that we discover true life. It is only when we embrace the burden of responsibility that we find the gift of meaning. It is only when choose the way of the cross that we experience the power of resurrection.

It is when we know and embrace the way of the cross that we will love with vulnerability and generosity and extravagance. And it is this love that bears witness to the truth of Jesus.

2.) The God who is love abides within us by his Spirit.

It is all too common for people to view one another as nothing more than instruments or utilities that help us reach our goals or fulfill our desires. The world has a way of conditioning us to dehumanize one another. We view one another as either obstacles to conquer or objects to consume.

Maybe you are tempted to think that God sees us the way we are tempted to see one another. Perhaps you may be tempted to view God as a distant parent who is annoyed and perturbed by your problems. Perhaps you view God as a judgmental boss who is impossible to please and easy to offend. Perhaps you view God as an irritable landlord who is eager to point out the ways you have messed up and is never willing to help with your problems.

And against this way of life, God reveals himself as a God who refuses to treat his people like pawns. Instead, the words of Scripture vest humanity with dignity, value, and purpose. We are created to commune with God, and because of the work of Christ, God has made a way to dwell within us by the Holy Spirit.

John writes, *“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 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”* (1 John 4:12–16).

God has revealed himself as a God who desires to abide with and live within and dwell among his people. This is one of the most crucial themes that is woven throughout the storyline of Scripture.

God created man and woman to dwell with him in Eden. In this way, Eden wasn't just a garden. It was a garden temple. It was a place where heaven and earth overlapped and interlocked. We were designed to experience spiritual communion with God. But that union with God was shattered by the intrusion of sin and the fracturing of creation. And the tale of the Bible is essentially the story of humanity's spiritual exile and estrangement, and God's plan to restore his people and redeem his creation.

That is why the Old Testament gives such a focus on the tabernacle and temple, the priesthood and the sacrifices. God is determined to make a way for his people to abide with him again. And through Jesus, God has made a way for his very Spirit to abide with us.

So know this, the God revealed in Scripture is not a God who can barely tolerate you. He is not a God who is disgusted by your frailty and failure. He is a God who has loved you at your worst and your weakest. He has sent his Son to be your Savior and his Spirit to live within you.

And we know and believe this to be true, we will be a people who draw near to the messy and the powerless and the broken. It is why Christians have always been a people who have dedicated themselves to caring for the sick, the hungry, and the broken. In love, we are to identify with the weak and weary, for it is precisely in our weakness and weariness that God has loved us and come to abide with us.

3.) The God who is love casts out fear.

The Bible speaks of a day that is coming when God will judge the living and the dead. And if we take this doctrine seriously, it should fill us with a sense of seriousness and sobriety about how we steward our one and only life.

However, the truth of God's love should also fill us with a sense of confidence as it relates to eternal judgment. John says, *"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"* (1 John 4:17–18).

Now you might say, "Well, the Bible also says that we should walk in the 'fear of the Lord.' So, which is it? Should we walk in the fear of the Lord or should God's perfect love cast out fear?"

The answer is "yes."

We should walk in the fear of the Lord, meaning that we should seek to cultivate within our hearts an awestruck wonder and worship of God for his glory, power, and might. But we should also be filled with such amazement before God's goodness and love that all fear of punishment is banished from our hearts.

We can walk in the fear of the Lord that acknowledges that our sin is so great that we are unworthy to stand before God's perfection and holiness. Yet, in the exact same moment, we can know that God's love is bigger than our biggest sin. In fact, we can even be confident on the day of our judgment because our confidence is rooted in Christ's perfect love not our imperfect lives. And that is how perfect love casts out fear.

But in light of this truth, we should ask ourselves whether or not we are living in the liberty that God has afforded us by his perfect love. In our own anxious age, are we, as the people of God, primarily known for what we fear or how we love?

Our world already has enough fear. But creation is a groaning for a people who bear witness to the perfect love of God.

4.) The God who is love has first loved us.

All human religion is founded upon the notion that something has gone wrong in this world. The-way-that-the-world-is is not the way that it should be. We intuitively know that something has fractured in creation. And we intuitively know that we are estranged from God and one another.

All human religion can be described as humanity's attempt to come back to God. We seek to work our way back into a righteous standing before God. We seek to merit our own redemption through self-effort, self-discipline, and good works.

But the problem is deeper than we could ever imagine, and we are simply unable to white-knuckle our way into communion with God through our own willpower and strength.

But whereas religion is humanity's attempt to find God, the gospel is the announcement that God has come to humanity in Christ. In Christ, he has made us alive when we were dead. He has known us when we were incapable of knowing him. He is the Father who seeks, pursues, and finds. He has loved us when we were unworthy, and his love is what makes us worthy. As John declares, **"We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).**

The world around us is often locked in a downward spiral of pain. We wound because we are wounded. We hurt others when we are hurt. We shame, and we blame. We cancel one another without any opportunity for repentance and restitution.

But Christ has shown us a better way. Because Christ first loved us, we are called to be a people who love first with a preemptive love.

Instead of shaming those who have wronged us, we can walk in the way of forgiveness. We can speak the truth in love and we can give grace where it is not deserved. We can break the vicious cycle of hate by the greater power of love.

Thomas Aquinas once wrote that to love is to seek the highest good of another. Who has God called you to love, and what does it look like to seek their highest good?

It may mean that today you need to make the choice to love first by forgiving first. It may mean you need to speak the truth in love instead of nursing judgmentalism or quiet resentment in your heart. It may mean that you need to make the choice to break the cycle of anger and hate.

5.) The God who is love has called us to love one another.

The primary focus of this entire passage is not just that we have been loved by God—it is that we must love others as God has loved us. Experiencing life in God and participating in the love of God are the same thing.

When God's love moves within us and through us, his love is, in John's words, "perfected." It is made complete. Like an electrical current running through an unbroken circuit, when we love one another, the love of God has achieved the purpose for which it was designed and sent. Simply said, we are not meant to be mere containers of God's love—we are to be conduits through which God's love overflows into this world.

We are called to love one another with a love that is supernaturally generous; a love that is proactive and willing to take the first step; a love that is willing to believe the best about one another and hope the best for one another.

No one has ever seen the invisible God. But when we love one another in this way, we make the love of God visible before a watching world. When we love one another in this way, we make the name and way of Jesus unignorable.

Conversely, we say we are Christians, but there is no evidence of love in our lives, it is likely that we have yet to truly encounter, know, and experience the God who is love.

As John states, *“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. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother”* (1 John 4:20–21).

The world is filled with many voices who are willing to give you someone or something to hate. The world will even find ingenious ways to feel justified and even righteous in your hatred. But Jesus has called us to the way of love. He has called us to love one another. He has called us to love our neighbors. He has called us to love our enemies.

Such a love is costly. To love as Christ has called us to love is often vulnerable and painful and sacrificial. But to love is worth it because Christ is worth it, and Christ is the very fountain and source of our love. His love is eternal, infinite, glorious, and never-ending. So, as we share the love of God, we will discover it is the one resource that does not diminish as we give it away. Instead, the more we give God's love, the more we experience God's love.

Conclusion

In context, we can see rather clearly this passage is not designed to exalt whatever our vision of love is to the place of divinity. Rather, this passage is designed to show us that we cannot grasp the meaning of the phrase God is love until we grasp the love God has revealed in Christ. There are many competing and conflicting visions of love in this world. But *whereas the world defines love in terms of self, God has defined love in terms of his Son.*

So, if we want to know the God that is love, we are to look to Jesus Christ.

Jesus has loved us with a love that is *patient* and *kind*; for he is the one who died for us while we were still sinners and his enemies.

Jesus did not come into this world with envy toward the powerful and impressive. He did not come boasting of his own glory. Instead, he came to serve and wash the feet of his own servants.

As his cross lay before him, Jesus did not insist on his own way, as he prayed for the cup of suffering to be spared. Nevertheless, he submitted to the will of his Father.

As he was betrayed, accused, beaten, and mocked, he was not irritable or resentful. Indeed, *“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a*

lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” (Isa 53:7).

Though condemned as a common criminal, he did rejoice in wrongdoing, but instead, he lived a perfectly righteous life as one who rejoices in the truth.

For our sake and our redemption, he bore all things. For “...*he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isa 53:5).*

Yet, he believed and hoped his sacrifice would lead to our salvation. He endured death for our sake. But his death was not the end; for by the power of his resurrection life, he lives eternally.

In Christ, we behold a vision of perfect love. For Christ is God, and our God is love. And in Christ, we behold the one who is the embodiment of the truth that: *“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends...” (1 Cor 13:4–8a).*

Redeemer Christian Church, may we be those who behold the love of God revealed in Christ. And may the world behold the love of Christ living, dwelling, and abiding within us.

May love one another as Christ loved us. And may the love of God be perfected within us.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. *Read 1 John 4:7–21 out loud. Have someone from your group rephrase what this passage is saying in their own words.*
2. *What does this passage reveal about God, Jesus, and God's plan?*
3. *What does this passage reveal about humanity?*
4. *As you look back on this passage, what are the truths that we should apply to our own lives? In other words, what are you doing well, and what do you need to change?*
5. *When you think about what you have learned from this portion of Scripture, can you think of someone you should pray for or share this with?*