

God is Love || 1 John 4:7-21  
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## Prayer for Illumination

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the Scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today.

## Introduction: Love

So you've gotten to know me over the last few months, so I'm going to give you a test about me, answer in your head whether these things are true or false.

I love my wife. True. I love this church. True. I love Jesus. True. I love my friends. True. I love pizza. True. I love my family. True. I love hiking. True. I love reading. True. I love dogs. True. I love ice cream. True. I love ice cream socials. True.

All true, I love a lot of things. But just because I use the same verb, to love, about these things doesn't mean they're equal. My love for my wife is different than my love for my friends. Or for pizza. My love for Jesus is different than my love for ice cream. In English we have one word for love. It is not bizarre for me to say, in English, that I love Jesus and I love pizza. Greek, which 1 John is written in, is different. There are three key words for love. *Eros* is a word for love invoking the love that two people have in a romantic relationship. *Philia* is a word for love that is between two people who are similar, friends or family. Philadelphia means love of brothers. There's a third word for love, and this is the word that is used in our passage today. It is *agape*, which is a sacrificial love. It is a love that builds up the other. It is a love that goes beyond the attraction of *eros* and the familiarity of *philia*. It is the love

that God shows us. Jesus was sacrificed to show us God's perfect *agape* love. Jesus saved us from sin and death on the cross to show us God's perfect *agape* love. Not because we deserved it or earned it, but because God loves us with a self-sacrificial love.

## **The Text: Love Explained**

Last week we talked about two tests that John gave to his congregants about how to discern whether or not a preacher or prophet is speaking a message from God or from the world. This week, we'll talk about a much broader test. It's a test not just for preachers or prophets, but for all Christians and whether we are from God or from the world. John says that God is love, and so the test of whether or not a person is from God? Do they love?

This passage has so much good stuff, I'll do my best to unpack it and display all of it. I wish I had a whole series to just go through this passage. Alas, next week we move on to the book of Ruth.

## **Verses 7-8 – God loves us, so we should love others**

So let's get started. First, notice how much love is used in first two verses. Beloved (1, that's us), let us love one another (2, what we are supposed to do), because love is from God (3, part of the reason we love); everyone who loves (4, what we *should* be) is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love (5, what we *shouldn't* be), does not know God, for God is love (6, the root of all love is God because God is love). 6 times, and it already explains so much about love. First, we are beloved – our identity is rooted in God's love for us. Second, we should love other people. Why? Third, because love is from God – and if we claim to be from God, then we should love. Fourth, it says that everyone who loves is born of God and knows God, here we see that while our core identity is God's beloved, our co-identity should be

people who love. We receive God's love, and so we should love. Fifth, there are plenty of people who do not love, and I bet some of them are Christians, and if they don't love they don't know God. And sixth, God is love. Love both from God and *is* God. Real love is inseparable from God.

### **Verses 9-12 – Jesus' sacrifice demonstrates perfect love**

And that's just the first two verses! Let's keep moving. Verse 9 explains what love is. Specifically, this is where we see a definition of *agape* love. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." Love doesn't start with us. Whenever we love, we are reflecting God's character.

Reflecting God's love. And God showed us love in sacrifice. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. Jesus came to show us God's love on the cross. *Agape* love is sacrificial love. *Agape* love costs something. For me to love my wife well, or to love Jesus in the right way, I have to give up a part of myself. I have to sacrifice. I can't be selfish. I don't have to give up anything to love pizza. Other than my health, I don't sacrifice anything to love pizza. You see the difference? God doesn't just say that he loves us, he *shows* us that he loves us through sacrifice. The God of the universe, the Creator of all, the Almighty, the Alpha and Omega, the Lord, showed you love through Jesus' sacrifice.

If that doesn't move us to love others, I don't know what will. And that's exactly how John follows this up in verse 11-12: "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." Since God loved us to the magnitude that he does, we ought to love one another. And even though we can't see God, we can see God's love in the cross, and we can show God's love to others.

Ok, we're not even half way through this text, and we need a recap. You are beloved. You are called to love others because love is from God, God is love, and God showed you his love through sacrifice.

### **Verse 13-21 – Holy Spirit and the commandment**

Now, how do we love? Look at verses 13-16: <sup>13</sup> By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. <sup>14</sup> And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. <sup>15</sup> God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. <sup>16</sup> So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

The Holy Spirit abiding in us gives us the ability to love. We can't do it on our own. We can't truly love in the *agape* sense of love unless the Spirit does so through us.

Then John moves on to tell us the power of love. He says that perfect love casts out fear. That perfect love, shown to us by God through the sacrifice of Jesus and Holy Spirit abiding in us, casts our fear. We have a long way to go before fear is cast out. Fear is a powerful enemy because fear works so well in the individual and in the masses. How often are our politics driven by fear and not love? How often is the news driven by fear and not love? How often are our finances driven by fear and not love? How often is our use of our time driven by fear and not love? Do we see the "other" – and who the other is differs for all of us – with fear or love? Perfect love casts our fear. You know what the most common commandment in the Bible is? Do not fear. God's love, which we receive and then give, casts out fear. Perfect love casts out fear.

John also gives us an idea of what love is not, and how our love can *easily* be hypocritical. <sup>19</sup> "We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup> Those

who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” God *shows* us love through action – through Jesus’ sacrifice. God doesn’t just say I love you. But we do, don’t we. We say “I love you God,” and we do not act as if we do. We say we love God while we ignore the stranger, or the prisoner, or the foreigner. We say we love God while we fear the other.

Let me put this as plainly as John does. If you say you love God and you do not love others, you are not just wrong. You are a liar. When we say we love God and we hate another person, we mock God and God’s love for us. You cannot love God and *not* love another person. Love God, love your neighbor as yourself. This is not a suggestion or a self-help step on how to live a better life. This is the *most important commandment* from God.

And that’s how John closes. “The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” The word “commandment” and the word “must” stand out to me. There’s no wiggle room. Love other people. Love God’s beloved, you’re not the only one God loves.

### **John Builds up to the Commandment to Love**

So we’ve gone through this whole passage, now let’s focus on one interesting development within this passage. John tells us to love one another three times here. But he gradually builds it. Look at this:

In verse 7, he says, “Beloved, let us love one another.” It’s an invitation, “Hey, I’ve got an idea, let’s love one another.” He opens up gently. With an invitation to love.

In verse 11, he builds, and says, “We also ought to love one another.” The word ‘Ought’ gives us a sense of correctness. If you want to be correct in loving God, then love one another. You have the option. So it goes from an invitation to a stronger urging of love.

In verse 21, he closes with something strong: “those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” John moves from let’s to ought to must. We no longer have the option to love your brothers and sisters. Now love is a must.

I know that loving some people is not easy. But maybe the Greek word *agape* can help us. We often associate the word love with the word like. I like pizza, so a stronger way of saying that is I love pizza. I like my wife, but I have a stronger emotion than that for her, and so I say I love my wife. We think of love as an evolution from liking to loving. But that’s not the case with the commandment to love one another. You don’t have to like someone to love someone. This means that the person whom we love doesn’t have to like or love us back, we are called to love regardless.

### **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

If anyone demonstrated this well with his life, it was Martin Luther King, Jr. I have a confession as a preacher: if someone else has said it better than I could, I’m gonna quote them. Now, it’s hard for us to imagine today, as we have elevated MLK to a hero and given him a national holiday, but Dr. King was not a popular man in our country. In a 1966 Gallup poll, taken two years before his assassination, two-thirds of Americans had an unfavorable view of Dr. King. Two-thirds of Americans did not like him! So, if anyone knew how to love people without them liking or loving him back, it was Dr. King. In a sermon on loving our enemies, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said this:

“It is almost impossible to like some people. ‘Like’ is a sentimental and affectionate word. How can we be affectionate toward a person whose avowed aim is to crush our very being and place innumerable stumbling blocks in our path? How can we like a person who is threatening our children and bombing our homes? That is impossible. But Jesus recognized that love is greater than like. When Jesus bids us to love our enemies, he is speaking neither of *eros* nor *philia*; he is speaking of *agape* understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. Only by following this way and responding with this type of love are we able to be children of our Father who is in heaven.”

Whether it’s loving our enemies or loving our dearest loved one, we are called to love because Jesus loved us first. He loved us with that *agape* love, love that is sacrificial and selfless.

## **Conclusion**

I want to relieve any fears out there: you can still say “I love pizza.” But what I want us all to walk away with is this: when it comes to people, we are called to love in a way that is sacrificial and selfless. We were created to love like this when God created us in God’s image and God is love, we were shown the perfect example of sacrificial and selfless love by Jesus, and we have the ever-present and loving companionship of the Holy Spirit to show us the way of *agape* love. God shows us love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each show us love. Now we are called to go and love because God loved us first, and because God is love.