

“Love One Another”
1 John 4:7-12
August 10, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

For the third time in this short letter, John brings up the topic of love for one another. It would be hard to overemphasize the importance of this to John and to the entire New Testament. It was Jesus, after all, who first gave such emphasis to this area of love for one another. And he spoke most forcefully about it on the eve of his crucifixion. He also spoke about it during the fifty days between his resurrection and ascension. 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.

John makes a statement here that is sure to raise some eyebrows. He says, **“Whoever loves has been born of God”** (v. 7). Think about that. He doesn't say what we would expect him to say, that those who are born of God are able to love. He says that only those born of God are able to love. If you see someone who loves, John says you can count on the fact that they are born again. How could it be that only those born of God are able to love? Many who don't claim to follow Christ enter into marriage and seem to have a genuine love for one another. How many songs, movies and books have been written about this topic? If you think about it, most of them assume that we all know what love is, and never bother to define it. The ones that do attempt to define love often get it wrong. The 1970's movie, *Love Story* has the famous statement “Love means never having to say you're sorry.” The actress and singer, Cher, once said, “Men should be like Kleenex—soft, strong, disposable.”

In our passage today, John not only commands love, but he defines it as well. We see what love is by knowing the love of God through Jesus. Only by first knowing God's love can we then love one another. Let's consider now the pattern and practice of love.

I. The Pattern of Love

Since this command to love one another is given such emphasis, it is very important that we have a good understanding of what it means to love. What exactly is God asking us to do when he tells us to love one another. God doesn't leave us in the dark about this. He provides us with a perfect picture of love, and we are asked simply to copy that picture. It is the love of God for us through Jesus. If you want to know what love is, you will need to see the love of God, because “God is love.” It is God's essence to be a loving God.

I suppose there is less disagreement today about this statement “God is love” than any other statement in the Bible. But what does it mean? The mistake so many make today is attempting to understand its meaning without supplying it with any doctrinal content. This passage teaches us of the love of God by using the theological categories of Jesus’s incarnation and his death, which it calls a propitiatory death. If we don’t anchor our view of God’s love in these theological terms, we end up defining God’s love as simply doing for us what we want him to do, without ever finding fault with us. “God, if you love me, you will give me the smooth, easy life I want and you will let me do whatever I want without ever finding fault with me or judging me.” That is not the love of God as John portrays it.

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 when he judges, he judges in love. But since he is a consuming fire of judgment, he is also holy and just in all he does. And since he is light, his love and judgment are always in complete truth.

John doesn’t leave us with a plain theological and philosophical statement about the love of God. He goes on to point out that God has made his love manifest. To manifest something is to show it so that it can be seen. God doesn’t show us his love by giving us everything we want, but by giving us what we need, and what we need is the incarnation and atonement of Jesus. These are the two great events John focuses on to show the love of God.

Let’s meditate on these events by noticing the way John describes them. **“God sent his only Son into the world”** (v. 9). When it says Jesus was “sent,” the clear implication 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. Jesus was sent as God’s only Son. That is simply John’s way of saying that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, one with him. And he was sent “into the world.” John often uses this word in a negative sense, to describe this world in its fallen condition or rebellion against God. Consider that for just a moment. It is impossible for us to appreciate the distance between the glories of heaven, where the beauty of God is seen and celebrated, and where there is perfect love within the Trinity, and the ugliness of the earth, with all its selfishness and cruelty. It is such a world that he came into that his own mother was not given the consideration a pregnant mom should be given when she goes into labor. She was put in a stable, so that the Son of God took his first breath in the plainest of settings. It was such a world that his own disciples spent large amounts of time arguing

about which of them was the greatest. At the end, they all deserted him. He constantly met with scheming people, who were only concerned about themselves. When he performed the very public miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead, we read that this incident was the one that led to the decision by the leaders that Jesus must die. Why? Because such a miracle would threaten their position as leaders when Jesus' popularity would grow to the point that the Romans would take notice and come and assert their might once again. Jesus came into a world where selfishness was universal. No wonder John adds the words, **“so that we might live through him”** (v. 9). Apart from Jesus, we are dead.

That brings us to the atonement, which John speaks of again by using this word “propitiation.” It means that Jesus, through his death, satisfied the wrath of God. He did so at a high cost to himself, a cost that was far greater than his own life. Jesus faced the horror of his coming crucifixion in the Garden of Gethsemane, when it sent him into such an agony that the mere thought of it caused him to sweat drops of blood. It wasn't the physical pain of crucifixion that so horrified him, but the prospect of broken fellowship within 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. These statements about the essential nature of God, as love, light and judgment all met at the cross. God's judgment was expressed in the crucifixion and forsaking of Jesus. His light, or truth, was expressed in the fact that when sin was laid on Jesus, no exception was made because Jesus was God's Son. Punishment came because the truth was that Jesus was made sin. The love of God is seen in this as we are forgiven and restored. So our hope of forgiveness and cleansing through the cross is not based only on the love of God, but also on the light and judgment of God. For the soul that trusts in Jesus, the very nature and character of God becomes the foundation of our forgiveness. If we are ever to love one another, we must get a vision of God's great love for us in Jesus. It is a testimony to the hardness of our hearts, and my own included, that we can read and hear of these things and remain unmoved by them. God help us!

II. The Practice of Love

As we move from the theological foundation of God's love for us to the practical application in our love for one another, there are three truths I want to point out from the text. The first truth is that love for one another is both essential and impossible. John says, **“Whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God”** (v. 7-8). Paul said the same thing in his famous love chapter, where he declared that all gifts, no matter how impressive, are worthless without love. Love for one another is an essential quality of true faith. If there is no love, that is the

clearest indicator of all that there is no true faith. What does this say about the person who has a position of leadership in the church, but whose heart is unkind and who is always criticizing others and putting himself forward and secretly rejoicing when he hears something bad about another Christian? It says that he is of the world, and the murderous spirit of Cain is in him. It doesn't matter if he gives a lot of money to the church or knows the Bible better than anyone else in the church. John could not be more clear. Anyone who does not love does not know God. But, we must go on to add, love for one another is not just essential, but also impossible in ourselves. It requires being "born of God," and no one can make himself be born. You cannot set yourself a series of steps that will yield love for others. Love for others is not a matter merely of forcing yourself to do loving things for others. If someone is difficult to love, forcing yourself to do loving things for that person would quickly fade. The kind of love John is talking about is supernatural, requiring being born of God. The application, then, is clear. When something is both essential and impossible, our only response can be to call out in desperation to God. God loves it when we call to him in desperation, and he will always answer that prayer.

The second truth we see here about the practice of love is that at its heart, love means to die. God's love through Jesus is the pattern of our love, and this love required his death through which he became the propitiation for our sins. This death is a death to self. It is selfishness that lies at the heart of our sinful nature, and it is death to self that lies at the heart of God's rescuing us and saving us. He rescues us from selfishness and frees us up to give ourselves to others. Let me read you a list from Martyn Lloyd-Jones of the many faces of selfishness: "self-centeredness, self-assertion, self-conceit, self-indulgence, self-pleasing, self-seeking, self-pity, self-sensitiveness, self-defense, self-sufficiency, self-consciousness, self-righteousness, self-glorying." At the heart of love is a willingness to follow Jesus into death by dying to self.

Let me suggest two applications of this truth about love and death. The first application is in the area of marriage. I am privileged to do some premarital counseling, and I enjoy the opportunity to do so. Most premarital couples coming to me are absolutely convinced that theirs is a solid and great love that will never wane and lead to something like divorce. I always warn them about the challenges their love will face when they get married, but I don't think many of them believe me. What I've noticed happening in many marriages is that a couple is drawn to one another by something they think is love, but which is actually nothing more than a mutual meeting of one another's needs. Many marriages are begun out of selfishness masquerading as love. For example, a woman growing up in an unstable family is attracted to a man who is to her a great example of stability and dependability. He brought some of his own baggage into the relationship too. He has always felt a bit insecure in social settings, and she was quite popular socially. Her social popularity drew

him to her. This kind of attraction is probably inevitable, and I don't think there's anything wrong with it. But it has nothing to do with love. The opportunity for love to begin to flourish in the marriage will come when she discovers that he is not quite as dependable as she wanted, and he finds that the traits that made her socially popular begin to irritate him. Then they will each have the opportunity to die to self and really begin loving the other person. It is only the gospel that can empower us in this way, because it teaches us that we are far worse than anyone thinks we are, but greatly loved by God, who has died for us.

The second application is in the area of our church community. There is a strong consumer mentality present in our culture, and if we are not careful it can easily be brought into the church. This mindset is always asking, "What am I getting out of this? What services does this church provide to meet my needs?" If the answer is, "Not enough," then people either complain or leave in search of a church that will better meet their needs. Our church wants to meet the needs of the people God brings to us. But if love is as essential as John says it is, and if death lies at the heart of love, you have a need to love by denying yourself and giving to others. One of the problems with a consumer mentality brought to church is that it leads to isolation and loneliness. Good community life requires people to give of themselves to others. What happens when we do that is that resurrection results. We follow Jesus not only into death, but also into resurrection and new life. We die as we give ourselves to others, and God brings about a much greater life for us.

The third truth about the practice of love for one another is found in the last verse of our text. **"No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us."** Our love for one another bears evangelistic fruit. What this verse is teaching is that the clearest picture people will get of the love of God is in our love for one another. Where else are people going to learn what the love of God is like, if not from seeing it lived out in our lives? We are to show it in our love, and then invite anyone who wants to join our community marked by this love. There is more at stake in our love for one another than we know.

CONCLUSION:

Let me apply this by asking you to think of the kind of person you have trouble loving. Maybe it's loud people, or quiet people, or proud people, or dishonest people. There are many of those people right here in this church, and God calls you to love them. You might find them irritating, but remember that your sin has irritated a God who has loved you to the uttermost. Now, take a step to love that person.