

After a few of the usual Sunday hymns, the church's pastor stood up, walked over to the pulpit, and before beginning his sermon, he briefly introduced a guest minister who was in the service. In the introduction, the pastor told the congregation that the guest minister was one of his dearest childhood friends and he wanted to give him a few moments to greet the church and to share whatever he felt would be appropriate for the service.

With that, an elderly man slowly stepped up to the pulpit and began to tell a story. He said, "A father, his son, and a friend of his son were sailing off the Pacific coast when a fast-approaching storm blocked any attempt to get back to the shore. The waves were so high, that even though the father was an experienced sailor, he could not keep the boat upright and the three of them were swept into the ocean as the boat capsized."

The old minister then hesitated for a moment, making eye contact with two teenagers in the audience who seemed somewhat interested in his story, and then he continued.

*The old minister said, "Making it back to the capsized boat and grabbing a rescue line, the father had to make the most excruciating decision of his life: **to which boy should he throw the other end of the lifeline?** He only had seconds to make the decision as both boys were struggling. The father knew that his son was a Christian, and he also knew that his son's friend was not. The agony of his decision could not be matched by the torrent of waves.*

As the father yelled out, "I love you, son!" he threw out the lifeline to his son's friend, and by the time the father had pulled the friend back to the capsized boat, his son had disappeared beneath the raging swells. His body was never recovered.

By this time, the two teenagers were sitting straight up in the pew, anxiously waiting for the next words to come out of the old minister's mouth.

"The father," he continued, "knew his son would step into eternity with Jesus but he could not bear the thought of his son's friend stepping into eternity without Him; therefore, he sacrificed his own son to save his son's friend.

He then said, "How great is the love of God that He should do the same for us. Our heavenly Father sacrificed His only-begotten son so that we could be saved. I urge you to accept His offer to rescue you and take a hold of the lifeline He is throwing out to you in this service."

With that, the old minister turned and sat back down in his chair as silence filled the room.

The pastor again walked up to the pulpit and delivered a brief sermon with an invitation at the end, but no one responded.

Within minutes after the service ended, the two teenagers were at the old minister's side. "That was a nice story," said one of them, "but we don't think it was very realistic for a father to give up his son's life in hopes that the other boy would become a Christian."

"Well, you've got a point there," the old minister replied glancing down at his worn-out Bible. "You are right, it sure isn't very realistic, but I'm standing here today to tell you that story gives me a glimpse of what it must have been like for God to give up His son for me, and just so you know, I was that father and your pastor was my son's friend."

What a great example of love. This morning we are going to pick up where we left off in **1 John** – before the Christmas break, and once again we are going to look at the topic of love, and since we have been away for a while from this letter by the Apostle John, let me get you caught back up.

If you recall, John was dealing with the false teaching of the Gnostics who had crept into the early church. These Gnostics claimed to be Christians – Christians with a special knowledge that normal Christians did not have, and with arms open wide, in the name of love, they got their foot in the door of the church, and once they found an audience, they spread their dangerous and deceptive teaching – rejecting the truth of *who* Jesus is and *what* He had done, offering a distorted view of sin, and creating doubt about salvation and the hope of eternal life to those who truly believe.

Well, the Apostle John writes the church to set the record straight with first-hand, eyewitness testimony about Jesus and His gospel teaching. He offered moral and doctrinal and behavioral tests to determine who is of the faith, and then John exposed these Gnostics for who they really were – antichrists with a spirit of lawlessness who speak from the view point of the world, and on the heels of this exposure, John rightly warns the church that we should not believe everything we see and hear and feel and experience – instead, everything should be put to the test using sound biblical doctrine to determine what is true and what is not.

Now, after all of that, John is bringing us back to the topic of love, and yes, he has already talked about love in Chapter 2, and then again in Chapter 3, and now we might be tempted to say, "*Okay John, we get it,*" but John wants to drive home the point that love is not optional for a believer. It's a distinguish mark of a born-again child of God and it's the greatest test of one's salvation.

So with that, if you have your Bible, turn to **1 John 4** and we will pick up where we left off beginning with **verse 7**. John tells us,

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

Beloved – in other words, *to those who are loved – let us love*. That’s how John begins this passage. Because we are loved – loved beyond measure – loved by God, we are to love one another – and this love that John is referring to is *agape* love.

Agape is one of a few Greek words for **love**, and this *agape* love is described as a sacrificial – lay down your life kind of love. It’s a selfless – putting others ahead of yourself kind of love. It’s a giving – expecting nothing in return kind of love. It’s the kind of love whose source is God, He invented it – it’s a divine love, and when our lives are characterized by this kind of divine love, we reflect the very nature of our heavenly Father, we model the life of Christ, and we reveal that the Spirit of God is at work in us.

Now, there are some who have read into this passage, suggesting that John is saying things he did not say, so just to be clear, the Apostle John is not saying that every person who shows love for others is a Christian. He’s not saying that. Love does not make someone a Christian – faith in Jesus Christ does.

On the flip side, John is not saying that non-Christians are incapable of love. There are some who teach that, but there are many non-Christians – first responders for example, who have sacrificially laid down their lives for others. Jesus said, ***Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.*** Like the Good Samaritan, that’s *agape* love, isn’t it?

So, for the sake of clarification, we need to keep this passage in context, and in context, keep in mind that John is writing to the **beloved** – he’s writing to professing Christians and what he is saying to them and to us is this – “*Christian, if you practice love, you know God. If you don’t practice love, you have no connection with God, and your claim to be a Christian is false.*” That’s what John is saying – it makes complete sense, and if it helps, think of it this way.

If a hose is connected to a water supply, water should flow through the hose. If a wire is connected to an electrical source, power should flow through the wire, and likewise, if a person is connected to God, the love of God should flow through them towards others. It’s as simple as that.

Our love for others as Christians shows our connection to God. Love cannot be separated from our faith, but if a person's life is not characterized by the practice of love, if love is not a controlling principle of one's life, then John says, no matter what people may claim, they do not know God – they are lost.

So, love is the greatest test of being born-again and knowing God, and then as if to hammer his point home, John directs our attention to what love looks like to the fullest extent – to the most extreme degree, and beginning with **verse 9**, we are told this,

⁹ By this the love of God was manifested in us; that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

In these few verses, John explains that in Jesus Christ, God's love was made abundantly clear and visible to all. When we look at Jesus – the Son of God, we see the greatest and fullest expression of God's love for us – a love which holds nothing back as evident in His unimaginable and immeasurable sacrifice for sin.

In **Romans 5:8**, a verse many of you know, the Apostle Paul explains it this way,

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

This is a very clear and insightful statement about God's great love. God's love could not turn a blind eye to our sin, because His holiness and His righteousness would never allow it – instead, God's love moved Him to send His own Son to bear the penalty of sin that we rightly deserved. Jesus became the **propitiation for our sins**, meaning He completely satisfied God's divine justice on our behalf. Motivated by love, Jesus drank the full cup of God's undiluted wrath – the cup that was meant for us.

God did not wait for us to love Him first. He did not wait for us to get our act together before loving us. We did not earn His love – He did not owe it to us, in fact we loved ourselves and sought our own way, and yet, according to the purpose and plan of God – motivated by His great love, Jesus laid down His life for us. In our desperate need, while in our trespasses and sin, Jesus gave His life so that we might live.

In spite of us, God loved us when there was nothing lovable about us, and for those who are born of God, if anything we feel or do can be called “love” – it is because it started with God.

Now beginning with **verse 11**, John explains how we are to respond to God's love for us. He says,

¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.

Since we are so loved by God, John then says, “**we also ought to love one another**” meaning God's love ought to be reciprocated and yet redirected, and let me explain what I mean by that.

To “*reciprocate*” means to respond to a gesture or to an action by making a corresponding one. We might say it is to return a favor – if somebody scratches your back, you scratch theirs; if somebody treats you to a meal, you should treat them back, but when it comes to God – things are somewhat different because no one has seen God the Father at any time, so when it comes to reciprocating the love of God which He has been shown to us – God desires not that we “*pay it back,*” but rather that we “*pay it forward.*” It's reciprocated and yet redirected.

This is the way in which others see the invisible God living in His people. People do not see God, and they may not read the Bible, but they do see and read the lives of those who claim to be Christian. Love is the evidence of God in us, and His love is **perfected** – it fulfills its purpose when we love one another.

Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, a famous British preacher, had five sons, all of whom became ministers of the Gospel. One day a visitor in their home dared to ask a personal question: “Which of you six is the best preacher?” In one accord, their united answer was, “Mother!”

Of course, Mrs. Morgan had never preached a sermon in a church; but her life was a constant sermon on the love of God. We put God on display by loving one another which begs the question – can others “see” the unseen God who abides in you by the way you love? Good question, isn't it?

So, thus far we have learned that God is love. This gospel truth of His love is proclaimed in His Word, and it was also revealed on the cross where Jesus died for us. “God is love” is not simply a doctrine in the Bible – it's a fact publicly displayed at Calvary. God has said something *to* us, God has done something *for* us, and next we learn that God does something *in* us.

Beginning with **verse 13**, John says,

¹³ By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. ¹⁴ We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the 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 We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

God says something *to* us – He tells us that He loves us. God did something *for* us – He showed the full extent of His love on an old rugged cross, but here we see that God does something *in* us – He abides in us through the indwelling Holy Spirit so that His love can actually flow *through* us and be perfected.

Now, if you notice in this passage, that word “**abide**” appears several times and that word refers to our spiritual union with God. It paints the picture of God dwelling in us or better yet, making Himself at home in us. That’s happens for every single believer as the Holy Spirits sets up His residence in our lives at the moment of salvation. That’s one side of the coin.

On the other side of the coin, that word “**abide**” also speaks to our walking with God, yielding ourselves to Him, and trusting and obeying Him – and I bring all of this up because this little word “**abide**” is also absolutely key when it comes to understanding where our love for others really comes from.

Turn to **Galatians 5**, beginning with **verse 22**. In this passage, the Apostle Paul tells us,

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Here Paul offers a list of the fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and I want to point out two glaring things. First on the list is **love** – and that is *agape* love in case you want to know, and secondly, these are called **fruit of the Spirit** for a reason. This fruit is not produced by believers – it is produced by the Spirit. It’s His fruit that is to be reflected in our lives towards one another.

Now let me take this one step further. In the same vein, the fruit of the Spirit are not goals for which we strive for as believers – again, they are fruit of the Spirit, and any fruit seen in a believer are a natural result of our abiding connection with God.

So then, if your desire is to be more loving and you are struggling with it, maybe you have *put the cart before the horse* so to speak, and your focus should be on abiding and then the loving of others will flow naturally from there.

You know, Jesus talked about abiding as well. One day Jesus was likely walking through a vineyard with His disciples. As Jesus was walking and talking, and they were following and listening, Jesus described Himself as the true life-giving vine and then He continued with these words in **John 15:4-5**. He said,

⁴Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

This fruit – more specifically love in our case, is not produced by us, only God can do that. We are the branches, but He is the life-giving vine, and our responsibility is to remain in an abiding relationship with God that grows and deepens over a lifetime, and a result, we become conduits of His love to others. Picture it this way.

Every human relationship is like a triangle. The two people in the relationship are at the base of the triangle at either end, and God is at the top. As the two people draw closer to the top of the triangle in an abiding relationship with God, they will also draw closer to one another. Weak relationships are made loving when both people draw closer to a loving God.

So, in this, we can be confident that God abides in us and we in Him if we see His Spirit producing love in us. Love is commanded of us, John says we ought to love, it should be evident in our lives, and that's because it's made possible to us.

A Salvation Army worker found a derelict woman alone on the street and invited her to come into the chapel for help, but the woman refused to move. The worker assured her: "We love you and want to help you. God loves you. Jesus died for you." But the woman did not budge.

As if on divine impulse, the worker leaned over and kissed the woman on the cheek, taking her into her arms. The woman began to sob, and like a child was led into the chapel, where she ultimately trusted Christ.

"You told me that God loved me," she said later, "but it wasn't till you showed me that God loved me that I wanted to be saved."

Jesus did not simply preach the love of God; He proved it by giving His life on the cross, and He expects His followers to do likewise. If we abide in Christ, we will abide in His love. If we abide in His love, we must share this love with others, and whenever we share this love, it is proof in our own hearts that we are born of God.

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