

Sermon 43, Who Started It?, 1 John 4:19

Proposition: God loved us first, and that is what evokes love in our hearts.

- I. He Loved Us First, v. 19b
 - A. He Loved Us From Eternity
 - B. He Chose Us Before the Foundation of the World
 - C. He Expresses His Love in Time
 - 1. Sending His Son to Die
 - 2. Sending His Spirit to Quicken
 - 3. Sending His People to Disciple
 - D. He Addressed Our Deepest Need
 - 1. Our radical dependence
 - 2. Our radical need for nurture
- II. Our Love Is Kindled by His, v. 19a
 - A. We Love *Because* He Loved
 - 1. We love Him
 - 2. We love each other
 - 3. We love neighbors & enemies
 - B. Our Love Is in Us, But Not of Us
 - 1. Stop taking credit for your ability to love
 - 2. Don't try to generate love from within yourself
 - 3. Focus on God's love for you

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, if someone asked you to produce a verse that taught "Calvinism," where would you turn? Some of you, no doubt, would go to Ephesians 1 and its glorious statement that we were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. Some of you would go to John 10 and its overwhelming statement that Jesus laid down His life for His sheep. Those are tremendous truths, ones that every Christian should be able to find in the Bible, ones that every Christian should drink faith and hope from on a daily basis. But brothers and sisters, if I had to find a verse that taught unadulterated Calvinism, I would pick this verse. It is God's love for us that has awakened our hearts and evoked love from them. It is God who started this, God who loved us first. Paul taught this same truth by saying that the grace of God teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts. But John makes it oh-so-clear by putting the message in terms of love. God reproduces Himself in us. That's what all of this begottenness language has been saying. We are not Him, but we are like Him, for we have known His love and

His love turns into what He wants to see: Lovers, people who abide in love because and to the extent that they abide in Him.

I. He Loved Us First, v. 19b

John tells us that God loved us first. The Arminian would say that God loves everyone equally, and some respond and some don't. But that's not what John says here. He doesn't say that God loved us first, and some of us chose to love Him back. He says that the reason anyone loves God is because He loved us first. That is the total explanation. God's love evokes love from us. But before we talk about that, we need to focus first of all the primal nature of God's love. That love was *first*. How was it first?

A. He Loved Us From Eternity

It was first in time. God loved us from eternity: "Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love, therefore with cords of lovingkindness have I drawn you." The love of God is part of His very nature — not in the universalist sense, such that God cannot help Himself but simply must save every last human being — but rather in the sense that He is loving, and when He saves it's a delight and when He damns it's a duty. God loved us from eternity. His love did not begin long ago. It has always been. He loves us in Christ, the Christ whom as His Son He has always loved.

He loved you first, before you were born, before you were conceived, before He created the Heavens and the Earth and made man to dwell here, He loved you.

B. He Chose Us Before the Foundation of the World

Now, that said, though it was in eternity past it is true that according to a human conception that was a time when God did not yet love you. There was a time when He was free to choose whether to set His saving love upon you or not. The time of His choice is the moment of election, the moment He determined to love you and save you as His own. We were indeed chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. Already it is a human-driven fiction of sorts to introduce a "before" and an "after" into eternity, just as it is to speak of "eternity past" and "eternity future." Yet that said, we know that God's love is not something that He developed for us after watching our good behavior for years. It's not even love at first sight. It is love long before first sight. We're going to express this more in a minute, but the best comparison is parental love. Did your parents begin to love you when they first saw you? Did they begin to make decisions with your welfare in mind only after you proved yourself? Unfortunately, in some cases the answer is "Yes." But for most of us, with average or better-than-average parents, parental love began long before we knew or could know anything about it. You love your mom and dad because they loved you first, before any time that you were aware.

But God's love came far before parental love. He loved you not only before you were conceived, but long before you could have been conceived. He loved you before creation began.

C. He Expresses His Love in Time

Yet as important as that eternal love is, it is matched or even overmatched by its expression in time. We are comforted that Jesus loved us; we delight in the Father's choice in eternity past. But honestly, that choice means nothing to us until it gets traction right here in the time-bound muck

and dirt of this world. And brothers and sisters, that is what the bulk of the Bible is about — not God’s decisions in eternity past, though they are mentioned here and there, but rather about the expression of those decisions in time.

1. Sending His Son to Die

The Father showed His primal love, His prior love, by sending His Son to die. This is not something you asked for. This is not something of which you knew or could have known anything. Long before anyone in this room existed, God sent His Son to save. Long before the Son came, God treated His people in light of the coming of His Son to die for them. So at a particular moment, “a moment in time but not of time, a moment in time but not like a moment of time, for time was made through that moment” (Eliot), the Son of God became one of us, a zygote in the womb of Mary. That love was first. That action was not historically prior to the call of Abraham, the anointing of David, or the preaching of Isaiah. But when that action was done, it was the action of a love that preexisted all of those things. When you get a 50th birthday present from your parents, you can’t say “Yep. I loved them all these years, and they have finally recognized it by taking action to do something for me.” Oh no. They loved you first — and that primal love is still coming to expression on your fiftieth birthday, and it will continue to come to expression as long as your parents have life in their bodies. Brothers and sisters, the death of Jesus is historically prior to the life of anyone here. But the love that caused the Father to send the Son, and that moved the Son to consent to go, was alive and active and burning with power and delight even longer ago, in eternity past. He loved you first. He made the first move to save.

2. Sending His Spirit to Quicken

But not only did the Father send His Son. As we know, the pouring out of the Spirit was secured through the sending of the Son. So in that sense, the gift of the Son is the Father’s greatest gift. But at the same time, we confess and worship the Trinity in Unity, and that means that the gift of the Spirit is not a single milligram less weighty than the gift of the Son. The Father gave us Jesus — and then He gave us the Spirit too, through Jesus and because of Jesus. This is yet another expression of His primal love. The Spirit has been with God’s people from Pentecost until today. The Spirit’s presence is the hallmark of the Messianic Era, of the times of Messiah. And the Spirit is the one who gives us life, who takes the good things purchased by Christ and conveys them to us. You would not come to new life without the Spirit, because the Spirit gives life, as Jesus said! You live in Christ, but the conduit that conveys that life to you is the Spirit. The one who makes you love, who fills your heart with peace and your songs with joy, is the Holy Spirit. He is the Father’s greatest gift right along with the Son, for they are equal in power and glory and divinity to each other and to the Father. Brothers and sisters, the Spirit’s presence in your life and mine is evidence that He started it, that He loved us first, that He is our God and will guide us even beyond death.

3. Sending His People to Disciple

But even though the gift of Christ and the gift of the Spirit are together the greatest gifts that God Himself can ever give, we must never neglect the glorious reality that the possession of our Lord

and His Spirit is a communal endeavor. We know Christ together. We are a Temple of the Holy Spirit together. We worship together, and we are shaped together into being like Jesus. In Christian hospitality, co-working, sharing the needs and challenges of life and ministry, we come to see the love of God in Jesus through the Spirit. That love wears a human face in both its guises as gift-love and need-love. You love Jesus by giving that cup of cold water to a little child in His name, visiting that prisoner in His name, feeding that hungry stranger or grateful friend in His name — and by the same token, you also experience the love of Jesus by receiving that cup of water, that place to stay, that meal or that visit. Brothers and sisters, John has told us not to love merely in word or tongue but in deed and truth. Sharing our needs with the body is just as important as sharing our wealth with the body. I'd like to take a second to fire a potshot at the practice of unspoken prayer requests. Such things short-circuit the process of discipleship that the body is supposed to help us with! Yes, I understand that it's awkward and probably unhelpful to say, "Hey y'all, please pray for Tina and me to work it out because we had a huge fight last night." But you could say "Pray for my temper. It got out of control this week." Then you have enlisted a bunch of allies to help disciple you and move you away from temper tantrums towards growth in Christ.

The church existed before you did. Many of you were blessed to be born into the church, to be nurtured in Christian homes. But even if you weren't, even if you didn't know what the church was until you were pushing 60, the church was there already when you needed it. Before you were converted, church people were praying for you. Before you came to this church, you were loved and wanted here. There was a community of people just like you, waiting with open arms to receive you. That too was part of God's prevenient love, a love that went before you and prepared everything for you.

D. He Addressed Our Deepest Need

A few weeks ago, I read a heartbreaking article about Romanian orphanages. At one point, experts determined that only 3% of the children in those orphanages were properly attached to an adult caregiver. Three percent! Ninety-seven percent of those who grew up in that environment did not learn how to love because they were not loved first. Of those who lived in one of these orphanages until after the age of 2, only 25% can live independently as adults.

1. Our radical dependence

And above and behind all of this is our need for God. You are metaphysically dependent on Him for your very existence. You are intellectually dependent on him for your ability to learn and know anything. You are physically dependent on His continuing providential sustaining and concurrence for your ability to move and live. We humans know that we are contingent. We know that we don't exist independently of something. But though some credit evolution and some credit nature and some credit chance, the fact of the matter is that behind all of these factors stands the Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, of all things visible and invisible. You depend on Him. And His love meets you where you need it by creating and sustaining and

upholding you. In Him we live and move and have our being. Outside of His providence we do none of the three.

2. Our radical need for nurture

Brothers and sisters, we think of ourselves as independent individuals — and so we are, *after* years of receiving love and care from a host of people, institutions, and communities. But we are radically dependent on that love and care, radically in need of it from the very first second of our existence as fertilized eggs. We can do nothing for ourselves for the 18 months or so of life. We cannot live independently for at least a decade. And even when we are grownups with the skills to manage what we consider an independent life, we need each other. I depend heavily on my bank, on my credit card company, on the city of Gillette that supplies my utilities, on the manufacturers who build my cars and devices, and on and on and on. This too comes from the love of God that creates the human communities that sustain me, the biosocial ones and the divine one we call the church. God's love was first in this. Yes, in historical time individuals were first — but God saw that it was not good for man to be alone, and He created community.

II. Our Love Is Kindled by His, v. 19a

But though God loved us first, love doesn't stop with Him. It starts with Him. And then it flows out and kindles love in our hearts. His love transforms us into lovers. That is what this sermon is about. That is what this Bible is about.

A. We Love *Because* He Loved

Our text this morning emphasizes that we love, that we exercise the Holy-Spirit-given gift of charity. And we do it because He loved us. His love is the exemplary cause of ours. It is also the efficient cause of ours. His love makes us love. And who does it make us love?

1. We love Him

Well, as some texts of this verse explicitly state, we love Him. Our love comes from the Father and is directed back toward the Father. If you are a Christian, you love your Heavenly Father because He loves you.

2. We love each other

But more than that, you and I love each other too. We've talked about that through this whole epistle. We have discussed laying down our wallets, taking tangible steps to speak the five love languages to each other, and on and on it goes.

3. We love neighbors & enemies

We even love our non-Christian neighbors, and our anti-Christian enemies.

B. Our Love Is in Us, But Not of Us

How is all of this possible? How can we possibly love those who spitefully use us, demean us, belittle us, and all the rest of it? Because the love we love with is as much God's love as it is ours. We love because He first loved us. That doesn't merely mean that we see His love and we want to have it too. It means more than that. It means that His love activates, powers, and creates our love. I think the best distinction here is the distinction between "in" and "of" that we also use to talk about the Christian's relationship to the world. Love is in us, but it's not of us. It's of God.

1. Stop taking credit for your ability to love

What this means is that God is the source of your love. You love because He loved you first. So stop taking credit for your ability to love. Your ability to love is a gift. It's generated within you by God's love coming in from outside.

If you live a pretty good, charitable, kind, self-sacrificing lifestyle, don't take the credit for it. It's not because you're such a good person, but because God is such a good God!

2. Don't try to generate love from within yourself

Don't focus on performing acts of love, either. Focus on being with God, on experiencing and celebrating His love. It is His love that enables you and empowers you to love.

3. Focus on God's love for you

So focus on His love for you. Work on the inputs, and the fruit will take care of itself. Seek the Spirit who pours out God's love in your heart — and He will grow love's fruit in your life.

He loved you first. He started it. Now seek Him to keep it going, to keep you loving Him and one another. Amen.