

“God Is Love”
(An Exposition of 1 John 4:7-12)¹

Introduction

From time to time during our study through the book of 1 John we have seen that the Apostle John's main purpose in writing what he does throughout this epistle is so that we as believers in Christ might have a strong sense of assurance of our salvation. He explicitly tells us as much in 1 John 5:13, where he writes:

“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.”

He does not want us to go through our lives as Christians struggling with doubts as to whether we have eternal life in Christ. He wants us to have the joy and peace of heart and mind that comes from having a firm and settled conviction that we truly know God through faith in Jesus Christ and that heaven really is our home.

We have also seen that John provides us with three (3) tests of the reality of our profession of faith and of whether or not we have truly been born of God: ***love, obedience, and truth***. Simply put, if we are genuine believers in Christ, we will *love the brethren*; we will *obey (however imperfectly) God's commandments*; and we will *hold to the truth of Christ* as revealed in the Word of God.

As we have seen, all of these three tests are important; all three things must be true if someone has been born again and knows Christ by faith. But of these three tests, John spends *the most time* teaching us of the importance of a sincere love of the brethren.

Our text is now at least the *third* instance where John deals with this subject at length in this epistle. He also did so previously in 1 John 2:7-11 and 1 John 3:11-18.² All three tests are *interrelated*, but in some ways this one seems to be key.

But notice one thing about our text (4:7-12) – even though John once again brings up the love of the brethren as *a test of sorts* related to our assurance (i.e. **“whoever loves has been born of God and knows God”** - v.7; and **“Anyone who does not love does not know God because God is love”** - v.8), he nevertheless *applies* these truths in such a way as to impress upon us *the importance of our duty as believers to love one another*.

There can be no doubt that John would have us to make it our sincere aim to love one another. In many ways that is *the main theme of our text*. In fact, the phrase **“love one another”** (which we also saw back in 3:11 and 3:23) occurs no less than *three* (3) times in our text (v.7, 11, and 12).

Here the Apostle John gives us at least three (3) reasons why we as believers must love one another, and so we will essentially outline our sermon today around these three reasons. ***First***, we must love one another because *God is love* (v.7-8); ***second***, we must love one another because *God has manifested His love to us by sending His Son* to save us from our sin (v.9-11); and ***third***, we must love one another because it is by our love for one another that *God's love is perfected in us* (v.12).³

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

² See also John Stott, *The Letters of John* (p.162); and James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John* (p.113).

³ This same threefold outline of our text is suggested by numerous commentators, including Boice, Hamilton, and Stott.

God Is Love (v.7-8)

You could say that the *first* reason that John gives us for why we as believers must love one another is primarily a theological one – something involving what is sometimes called *theology proper*, or the doctrine of God – *God is love*. In v.7-8 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.”

Not only does John teach us that we as believers must love one another because **“love is from God”** (i.e. God is the *source* of love), but even more than that, **“because God is love”** (v.8). It would be hard to overemphasize the depth and magnitude of this statement about God. In his book, *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer writes:

“St. John's twice-repeated statement, God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, 16), is one of the most tremendous utterances in the Bible – and also one of the most misunderstood. False ideas have grown up round it like a hedge of thorns, hiding its real meaning from view, and it is no small task cutting through this tangle of mental undergrowth. Yet the hard thought involved is more than repaid when the true sense of these texts comes home to the Christian soul. Those who climb Scotland's Ben Nevis⁴ do not complain of their labor once they see the view from the top!”⁵

This great mountaintop truth about God, that *He is love*, is sadly *one of the most abused statements in all of the Bible*. Many wrench this statement completely out of context in such a way as to try to make love the only attribute or perfection of God. They would pit His love against His holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

They say such things like “A God of love would *never* . . .” Judge the wicked, condemn a certain lifestyle, send anyone to Hell for their sins, etc. But that is just *not* true, is it? That is a re-making of God in our own image, as if God were just like us. That is idolatry, and it is blasphemous.

That God is love *in no way* minimizes or undoes the fact that He is also *infinitely holy and just*. In fact, to say that **“God is love”** is to say that God's love is an infinitely holy love, and His holiness is an infinitely loving holiness. *There is no contradiction between God's attributes or perfections.*

And what is John's point in bringing all of this up? Why does he mention the love of God and that **“God is love”** here in our text? First and foremost, He does so to show us that because **“love is from God”** and even more than that because **“God is love,”** if we have truly been **“born of God”** and *know* God, then we too must love as well.

The *absence* of such self-sacrificial love for the brethren is evidence that one has not been born of God and does not truly know God. The presence of such love is sure evidence that we really *have* been born again and know God.

By this we may have an infallible assurance of our salvation in Christ. And by this we should be further motivated and energized to seek to grow more and more in a sincere love of the brethren! See how our growth in the knowledge of God should lead to the transformation of our lives! *Because God is love, let us love one another!*

⁴ Ben Nevis (which may mean mountain of the clouds or mountain of heaven) is the highest mountain in Scotland.

⁵ p.117

God Has Loved Us In Christ (v.9-11)

That brings us to the *second* reason that John gives us for why we as believers must love one another. We must love one another, not just because God is love, but also *because God has loved us in His Son*, the Lord Jesus Christ! In v.9-11 John tells us:

“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.”

Not only *is* God love, but God has also *manifested* His love toward (or “**among**”) us. And how has He done that? By sending His only-begotten Son into the world “**so that we might live through him**” (v.9). Here we see the greatness and majesty of the love of God toward sinners like us! And here we see the folly of those who would try to pit God's love against His holiness and justice.

John once again *points us back to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ*, and His death of the cross as the atonement for our sins and for our salvation.

Because God is *love* He saved us; because God is *holy and just and true*, He saved us, *not* by sweeping our sins under the rug or denying Himself in any way (which He cannot do), but by sending His Son to take our sins upon Himself on the cross so that we might live!

This is what Paul is talking about in Romans 3:23–26, where he tells us:

“ . . .for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in *Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*” (Italics added)

And so not just *the nature and perfections* of God, but also *the wonderful works of God* for our salvation are to spur us on to love one another. As John says later in this very chapter, “**We love because he first loved us.**” (v.19)

And is this not precisely what John tells us in our text when he writes, “**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.**” (v.10)?

Love *does not* and *cannot* start with us. We did *not* love God; we *hated* God and were *enemies* of God! And yet God loved us! As Paul says in Romans 5:8, “**but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**” In fact, it was “**while we were *enemies* we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son . . .**” (Romans 5:10)!

And what does John tell us in v.11? “**Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.**” If God loved us *in this way* (!), then we also must love one another. This is the same language that John used in John 3:16, isn't it? “**For God *so loved* the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.**” If God loved sinners like us in *this way*, how can we *not* love one another!

No wonder we should love one another! *Ian Hamilton* writes:

“John never forgets he is writing as a pastor. He understands that the supreme motivation for godly living lies in us grasping the wonder of God's love for us. The sheer undeserved kindness (grace) of God's love for us should inspire us to 'love one another.’”⁶

Do you want to grow in your love for God and for others, especially for the brethren? Then seek more and more to grasp the wonder of *the God who is love* and of God's love for us in His Son, in sending Christ to be the propitiation for our sins so that we might live through Him!

The Love of God Being Perfected In Us (v.12)

That brings us to our *third and final* point, which is that we must love one another because *that is how the love of God in Christ is perfected in us!* In v.12 John writes:

“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.”

We may wonder why John brings up the fact that **“No one has ever seen God.”** It seems likely that the *Gnostics* (the false teachers who were disturbing the church in that day) were claiming some kind of *mystical experience or vision of God*, and yet they *denied* the love of God by denying the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. And they certainly did not love the brethren – no surprise.

And so John tells us something kind of shocking – certainly *the language that he uses here* is shocking. He tells us, not only that God Himself abides in us when we love one another (!), but also that in some way **“his love is perfected in us”** when we love one another!

What does that mean? Is there something lacking in God's love outside of believers loving one another? Certainly not. But it is as if he were saying that the sincere love of the brethren among Christians is the natural conclusion or purpose of God's love for us. It is as if something were missing from the love of God in us if we do not love one another.

More than that John seems to be saying that it is in the love of the brethren that God may be *seen* in the world! Our love for each other as Christians is evidence of the truth of the love of God in Jesus Christ!

Notice how *all three Persons of the Trinity* have been woven throughout John's appeal to us to love one another! That God the Father is love, that God loved us by sending His Son to save us, and by the work of His Spirit (not mentioned by name but by implication) – *the love of the triune God for us* - if *that* doesn't make us love one another, nothing will!

In conclusion, James Montgomery Boice sums it up well when he writes:

“These are the three reasons Christians are to love one another: first, because God is love and we are of God; second, because God loved us in Christ and so revealed his love to us; and third, because God is at work in us by His Spirit to bring that love to completion.”⁷

6 *The Letters of John*, p.60

7 *The Epistles of John*, p.117