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Love

1 John 4:7–21

So far in 1 John, the apostle has spoken at length on four main subjects:

1. The perfect righteousness of the God-who-is-light, in whom there is no darkness whatsoever (1 John 1:5). This righteousness is characterized by love (1 John 3:10).
2. Our sin (1 John 1:6, 8, 10), which has infinitely alienated us from the God-who-is-light. Additionally, John warns us not to fall back into sin (1 John 3:4–10), whether through the temptation of the world (1 John 2:15–17) or the lies of antichrists (1 John 2:18–27, 4:1–6).
3. Our salvation, which was purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ (1 John 1:7), who is the eternal Son of God (1 John 2:22–23), yet who became human (1 John 4:2–3) and submitted to death to propitiate (i.e., to appease) the Father’s wrath against our sinfulness (1 John 2:2). Through Christ, we have already become God’s children, even though the fullness of our glory has not yet appeared (1 John 2:28–3:3).
4. Our love for one another (the brothers), which is the litmus test for the genuineness of our faith and our salvation (1 John 2:9–11, 3:11–24).

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Many commentators describe John's writing in this letter as a spiral, in contrast to the straight line of logic the Apostle Paul typically uses in his writing. Paul writes by developing an argument verse by verse, chapter by chapter, always building on what he has already written and rarely going back to pick up topics again that he has already covered in a particular letter. John, on the other hand, circles back again and again to these four major emphases. John never repeats what he has already said, but he is always spiraling in from one theme to another, then to another, then the next, and then back again to the first. Bit by bit, he gets closer and closer to the core of his message, until he arrives at the center of his message at the very end of this letter. Not a word is wasted, but John never gives his exhaustive message on any subject in a single shot.

In 1 John 4:7–21, John ties all of these themes together explicitly for the first time. He explains the link between the four themes in this way: since (1) God is love, and since (2) we are sinners who have been (3) saved by God's gracious love, (4) we ought to love one another in the same way God has loved us. John writes:

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, for the love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹In this the love of God is manifested among us, for God has sent his only begotten Son into the world in order that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is the love, not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us and sent his Son *to be the propitiation concerning our sins*. ¹¹Beloved, if in this way God loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one at any time has beheld God. If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:7–12)

Here, John gets to the core of his message about Christian love. As we looked at in our study of 1 John 3:11–24 in chapter

6, John grounds God’s commandment to love one another in the character of God, “for God is love.” In this passage, John calls our attention to three characteristics of God’s love that prove how necessary it is that we should love one another, just as God has loved us.

WE ALSO OUGHT TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER

First, John reminds us that God is the source of love: “Beloved, let us love one another, for the love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7). All love comes from God, John writes, so anyone who loves does so because of their relationship to God (“everyone who loves has been born of God”) and their intimate, personal knowledge of God (“and knows God”). God is like a master artisan who teaches his signature craft only to his children. We can reasonably infer that someone is a child of God if we see that person loving others in the same way that God loves us.

Let’s be very clear about the implications of what John is saying: only Christians are capable of this kind of love. John is explicit on this point; however, it is important to recognize that John is not saying that non-Christians are incapable of loving their parents, their siblings, their spouses, their children, or their friends. Even if Christianity helps us to love our families and our friends better than we would be able to apart from Christ, that kind of love is nevertheless common to all humankind.

So, John isn’t talking about common love in this passage but about how God is the source of a particular love for a particular people. The Greek here is very specific. Lenski draws our attention to the fact that John is writing not about love in the abstract but specifically about *the* love (*he agape*): “The first fact is that ‘this love is from God.’ Note the [word *the*]. When our versions translate ‘love is of God,’ this is not exact.... Only ‘*the* love,’ the one that John urges, the one of

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one Christian toward another, is from God.”¹

Recall that John did something similar in a previous passage when he wrote, “In this we have come to know *the* love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (1 John 3:16). John was not talking about a generic kind of love but about *this* righteousness-love.² Here too, John is referring to a supernatural, sacrificial love of one Christian for another, a kind of love that flows only from the eternal life God gives to his children (1 John 3:14). This love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

Yes, God loves the whole world. Yes, God sends his rain to bless the just and the unjust alike (Matthew 5:43–48). Nevertheless, God bears a special love for his people, and he calls us to love one another in a manner that reflects his special love for his people. Paul makes a similar statement in Galatians 6:10: “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and *especially to those who are of the household of faith.*” We are called to love and serve all people, but we are called to love and serve those who are of the household of faith in a special way. This doesn’t lower the bar for the way in which we are called to love the world; instead, it raises the bar for the way in which we are to love our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

Second, John warns us that failing to love is incompatible with knowing God, because in fact “God is love” (1 John 4:8). In other words, God’s identity is indistinguishable from his love. Love is not an optional, add-on feature to God, but rather, God is love.

Now, “love” can mean many things to many people, especially in our culture. Today, the world worships the idea that love can be whatever we make it to be. When we say that God is love, though, we are not allowed to project our own ideas of love onto God to define him. Instead, God is the one who defines love, because God is love. We cannot understand God from our own vague ideas about love; rather, we can

only understand love by studying what God has revealed about himself in his word and in his Son Jesus Christ.

And very often, what God teaches us about himself will completely overturn our preconceptions about the nature of love. C. S. Lewis’s surprising definition of “a loving God” is one of my favorites:

You asked for a loving God: you have one. The great spirit you so lightly invoked, the “lord of terrible aspect,” is present: not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate, nor the care of a host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests, but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist’s love for his work and despotic as a man’s love for a dog, provident and venerable as a father’s love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes.³

God’s love lays a claim on our lives. Our own desires for God’s love would mainly have him affirming us so that we could continue to do whatever we want to do because we want God’s love to take away negative consequences for our actions. God’s actual love toward us, however, refuses to leave us as loveless, selfish, cold creatures because he would be unloving to do so. Instead, God’s love is exacting, jealous, and despotic in its demands, but only because God’s love is infinitely gracious toward us.

The ultimate picture we have to illustrate the union of God’s consuming jealousy with his perfect benevolence is the cross of Jesus. At the cross, God poured out on his own Son all his fury and wrath against our sin—that is, our offenses against God’s love. God’s wrath is not the opposite of God’s love but the natural, righteous result of God’s love against sin.

The doctrine of God’s wrath is unpopular in our culture because we have a very low view of sin. We imagine the Bible is a rule book full of complicated, antiquated laws, and so

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we struggle to understand what we perceive to be God's disproportionate response when we stumble over a technicality here or there. If God flies off the handle for the smallest of offenses, we tell ourselves, then we are morally superior to God, with a better, more tolerant love. But remember what John wrote earlier: "If we say that we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:10).

We simply do not comprehend the horror of sin. Sin not only brings guilt, but it distorts our ability to see our own guilt, and so we do not fully recognize its ugliness. We fail to recognize the glorious beauty of God's perfect love, and we work hard to downplay the extent to which we have perpetrated evil against others, against ourselves, and even against God himself through our sin. Then, when God's righteous love opposes us in our sin, we shift into rejecting God's love outright.

What this also means is we do not understand God's love, and we do not understand God's wrath. Accordingly, John writes, "In this is the love, not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation concerning our sins" (1 John 4:10). Again, John insists on this love that God demonstrated toward us at the cross of Jesus with the use of the emphatic word *the*: "In this is *the* love." John dismisses the value of what we call love so that he can reframe the discussion entirely.

Our love, John insists, is a poor imitation of the extraordinary love God has demonstrated toward us by sending his Son Jesus to the cross. We can talk all day about what good people we are, listing out all of our meager displays of "love," but John dismisses everything we have done (it is "not that we have loved God") by pointing to this third characteristic of God's love as the decisive proof that God is love: it is "that [God] has loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation concerning our sins." The good news of the gospel is that God set aside his wrath against us by pouring it out on his own Son, making Jesus to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

And so, beloved, if God so loved us—as the source of love, as Love himself, and as the ultimate Lover who pursued us to the cross—then we also ought to love one another. God requires love from us not to burden us but because the entire nature of his relationship toward us is defined by his own great love.

ABIDING IN LOVE, ABIDING IN GOD

To summarize 1 John 4:7–12, then, John has laid out the obligation that we have as Jesus’ disciples to love one another, on the basis of the love God has shown to us: “Beloved, if in this way God loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11). Based on the facts that God is the source of love, that God is Love himself, and that God demonstrated his great love toward us by sending Jesus to die on the cross for our sins, John insists we also ought to love, because “the one who does not love does not know God” (1 John 4:8).

Loving as God has loved us, however, is much easier said than done. How can we live up to such an overwhelming task? John explains:

¹³In this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given to us from his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and bear witness that the Father has sent the Son *to be* Savior of the world. ¹⁵Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, in him God abides, and he in God. ¹⁶And we have come to know and have believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and the one abiding in the love abides in God, and God abides in him. (1 John 4:13–16)

The only way to become someone who loves according to God’s example is through an intimate, personal, living encounter with Love himself. Only by knowing Love close-up do we become lovers: “God is love, and the one abiding in the love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16).

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Now, many people—Christians and non-Christians alike—rightly believe that love is important; however, the more important question is not whether someone believes in love but rather how someone suggests we accomplish that goal of loving one another as God has loved us. At first glance, love seems so straightforward that we are tempted to skip right over John’s message that we cannot love unless we “abide in God.” But apart from God, we have no access to God’s love.

John is again teaching us that we must abide in God. We talked previously about John’s use of the word *abide* in chapter 5, looking at 1 John 2:28: “And now, little children, abide in him.” Now, in 1 John 4:13–16, John spirals in closer to what it means to “abide in God.”

Here, John tells us that abiding in God is primarily a theological issue. John writes, “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, in him God abides, and he in God” (1 John 4:15). John has already railed against those who deny that Jesus is the Son of God (1 John 2:22–23), as well as against those who deny that the Son became human (1 John 4:2–3), and here he reiterates what he has already said: those who abide in Christ (the true disciples of Jesus) freely confess that the human Jesus is the Son of God.

But this isn’t a dry, academic lecture on theology. In this phrase, John is exposing the vital connection between right doctrine and right living—that is, between good theology and loving one another as God has loved us. God abides only in those who rightly confess Jesus as the Son of God who was sent to be the Savior of humankind, and only those who confess this about Jesus abide in God. Therefore, our ability to love—which requires our abiding in God, and God’s abiding in us—depends on sound theology. Look at the repeated phrases in verses 15 and 16:

¹⁵Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, *in him God abides, and he in God.* ¹⁶And we have come to know and have believed the love that God has for us.

God is love, and *the one abiding in the love abides in God, and God abides in him.*

Christian discipleship does not force us to choose between good theology and love. John is telling us here that love is impossible apart from good theology, and that good theology necessarily leads to love.

Careful reading of this passage, though, raises one more question: If our ability to love depends on sound theology, then where does our theology come from? John actually has answered this question already in verse 13, where he unfolds the main theme of this passage: “In this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given to us from his Spirit.” Our ability to confess Christ—as well as our ability to love—requires the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

On this, Colin Kruse writes:

Within this letter the role of the Spirit is always related to the truth about Jesus Christ. If we take note of the role of the Spirit in the rest of the letter, we have to conclude that it is neither the very presence of the Spirit nor the activity of the Spirit producing love for fellow believers that the author has in mind here, but rather the Spirit as witness to the truth about Jesus proclaimed by the eyewitnesses (cf. 2:18–27; 3:24b–4:6; 5:6–8)... What the author is implying in 4:13, then, is that because the Spirit teaches believers about the love of God expressed in the sending of the Son to be the Saviour of the world (4:14), and because they believe that teaching, they may be assured that they dwell in God and God in them.⁴

We do not believe because we are smarter, more spiritually sensitive, or clearer thinkers than other people; we believe because the Spirit personally takes us to be his pupils and because he gently, graciously, and clearly teaches us about the love the Father has for us in Christ Jesus. And when we see the love of God—genuinely see it, love it, and believe in it, with humility, repentance, and joy—our lives are transformed through the gospel.

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Though it seems so simple for someone to believe in Christ Jesus for salvation, such an act actually requires a miracle of God in our hearts. But the gospel is that the same God who created the entire cosmos now creates life, faith, and love in our cold, unbelieving, unloving hearts.

The Apostle Paul, in a letter to the church in Corinth, writes this about his fellow Israelites who were continuing to reject Christ:

^{3:14}But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, the same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. ¹⁶But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.* ¹⁸And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. *For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit....* ^{4:6}For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 3:14–18, 4:6)

The Holy Spirit is the Lord who gives freedom to those who are in bondage to sin, with a veil covering their hearts from seeing the glory of the Lord. The Spirit is the one who pierces the veil to enter our hearts directly, shining the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Then, as the Spirit teaches us about the beauty and glory of the crucified and resurrected God-man Jesus Christ, we turn to the Lord, and the veil is removed, so we are transformed into Christ’s image from one degree of glory to another as we continue to abide in him.

PERFECT LOVE DRIVES OUT FEAR

At this point, John ties together our growth in love with the

hope of the gospel:

¹⁷In this the love has been perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment, for just as he is, so also we are in this world. ¹⁸Fear is not in love, but perfect love drives out fear, for fear involves punishment, but the one who fears has not been perfected in love. ¹⁹We love because he has first loved us. ²⁰If someone says, “I love God,” but he hates his brother, he is a liar: for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God, whom he has not seen. ²¹And this command we have from him, that the one who loves God should also love his brother. (1 John 4:17–21)

As he had done in chapter 2, verse 28 (“And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is manifested we may have complete confidence and not shrink in shame from him at his coming”), John points to the day of Christ’s return as a day of judgment to be feared by those who do not abide in him. As he had also done in that verse, John here stresses the confidence believers should have for the day of judgment. But what is the basis of our confidence? Or specifically, how do we know whether we are among those who have confidence in Christ? When John writes that “perfect love drives out fear” and that “the one who fears has not been perfected in love,” he is explaining that love is evidence of God’s work in our lives: “In this the love has been perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment, for just as he is, so also we are in this world” (1 John 4:17). If God has begun the process of perfecting his love in us (even though we will still fall short of God’s own perfect standard of love), we may have absolute confidence for the day of judgment, because as Christ is, so also are we in the world. In other words, just as Jesus cannot be condemned now that he has risen from the dead in victory over sin, we who abide in him by faith cannot be condemned either.

This love, then, is the link between verses 17 and 18 and 19 to 21. Love is the evidence of God’s saving work in our lives

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(and therefore the evidence of our eternal confidence), and so love is the expectation and goal for Christian conduct. At first it seems as though John is abruptly changing the subject in verse 19, but he is simply extending his logic. If love is our confidence for the day of judgment, then Christians ought to take love seriously in our daily lives. Those who say they love God but yet hate their fellow believers are liars, and because they do not love, they have no reason for confidence on the last day.

John is challenging us to honestly evaluate the evidence of our salvation. Is the fruit of love present in our interactions toward those others for whom Jesus Christ has died? If not, then shouldn't that suggest to us that we do not know God (1 John 4:8)? If we cannot love someone who bears God's image, then how can we imagine we love the origin of that image?

And so beloved, let us love one another, for the love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. If you were going to describe God's love to someone else, what would you say? How would your description align with what John describes in this passage? How would your description align with the example of Jesus dying on the cross?
2. How does a full understanding of the nature of sin change the way we view God's love in comparison to our own love?
3. What role does the Holy Spirit play in your salvation? How aware are you of his presence?

CHAPTER 6: RIGHTEOUSNESS (I JOHN 3:11–24)

1. Donald Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle: An In-Depth Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 267.
2. Ibid., 273; John Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 147.
3. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Epistle of John*, in *Calvin Commentaries*, vol. 22 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 222–23.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 210, 213.
5. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Epistle of John*, 224.
6. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 149.

CHAPTER 7: DISCERNMENT (I JOHN 4:1–6)

1. Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).
2. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Letter 101,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 7, trans. Charles G. Browne and James E. Swallow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 440.
3. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, vol. 14, trans. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1905), 264.
4. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 295.
5. Ibid., 298.
6. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 157.

CHAPTER 8: LOVE (I JOHN 4:7–21)

1. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 495.
2. Additionally, John made emphatic use of the article *the*

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in 4:3: “every spirit that does not confess *the* Jesus having come in the flesh is not from God” to differentiate the having-come-in-flesh Jesus from the various false versions of Jesus promoted by the prophets of the spirit of error.

3. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 39.
4. Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 163.

CHAPTER 9: FAITH (1 JOHN 5:1–12)

1. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 172.
2. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1961), 103.
3. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 372.

CHAPTER 10: PRAYER (1 JOHN 5:13–17)

1. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 185.
2. Jeremiah 7:16–18, 11:14, 14:11; see also Kruse, *Letters of John*, 193.
3. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 534–35, emphasis added.

CHAPTER 11: ETERNAL LIFE (1 JOHN 5:18–21)

1. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 393.
2. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 194.
3. Appian, *The Civil Wars*, book 1, §120.
4. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 544–45.

CHAPTER 12: THE CASE STUDY OF THE ELECT LADY (2 JOHN)

1. The only other New Testament letter that does not