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WHY WE MUST LOVE

1 John 4:7-11

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1 John Lesson 19

Why We Must Love 1 John 4:7-11

The church father, Jerome, said that when the apostle John was in his extreme old age, he was so weak that he had to be carried into the church meetings. At the end of the meeting he would be helped to his feet to give a word of exhortation to the church. Invariably, he would repeat, "Little children, let us love one another." The disciples began to grow weary of the same words every time, and they finally asked him why he always said the same thing over and over. He replied, "Because it is the Lord's commandment, and if this only is done, it is enough" (cited by John Stott, *The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], p. 49).

As we come to these verses, we may identify with those early believers. John has already emphasized the importance of love in 2:7-11. He hit it again in 3:11-18. We may be prone to say, "Okay, brother, we've got that one down now. Let's move on to something else." But John not only repeats the imperative to love one another in 4:7-5:4, but also he hits it longer and harder than at any other point in the book. He wants to make sure that we understand that love is *not* an optional virtue for the believer. It is to be the distinguishing mark of the church in the world. John goes so far as to say that if you do not love others, you do not know God (4:8). So we all need to examine our own lives by this supreme standard.

By way of introduction, note that while love is the *inevitable* result of being born of God, it is *not* the *automatic* result. John states (4:7), "Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." The implication is that the life of God imparted to us in the new birth manifests itself in love for others. If we are children of the One whose very nature is love, then we will be like our Father. But at the same time, John commands (4:11), "Beloved, if God so loves us, we also ought to love one another." It is not automatic or effortless! There is always room for growth in love.

Also, note that love is not opposed to truth. John has just spent six verses warning us (4:1), "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many

false prophets have gone out into the world." He did *not* say, "Let's just set aside those points of doctrine where we disagree and come together where we do agree, loving those who differ on these matters." Because these men denied essential truth about Jesus Christ, John calls them false prophets, whose teaching is the spirit of anti-christ. Love does not mean that we set aside the truth for the sake of unity. John was there when Jesus prayed that His disciples would be one, that the world would know that the Father sent Him (John 17:23). But he also heard Jesus pray, "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

We have to exercise wise discernment here. Some doctrinal differences are not essential to the gospel, and we need to love brothers who differ with us on these matters. Some of these doctrines are important for how we live the Christian life, and so we may vigorously debate them among ourselves. But we must always remember that we are debating as brothers in Christ. If we divide from one another over every minor point of doctrine, we fall into the errors of "fighting fundamentalism." At the heart of that sort of cantankerous behavior is a spirit of pride, where I assert that everyone must agree with me on every minor issue.

At the same time, some issues fall into a gray zone, where salvation may not be at stake, but to embrace a particular view will have momentous consequences. For example, to embrace so-called "evangelical feminism," which argues that there are no gender distinctions in the church, has significant implications both for the church and the home. On a practical level, I cannot see any way that those who believe that women may be pastors or elders can work in the same church with those who believe that the Bible prohibits women from holding these offices. The positions are mutually exclusive. But, we should not accuse those who differ with us of not being saved, unless they also deny the essentials of the gospel.

But there are other doctrines where believing or rejecting them make the difference between heaven and hell. On these issues, we must never compromise truth for the sake of love. To deny the necessity of the substitutionary atonement of Christ (which John affirms in verse 10), or that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ, apart from our works (Eph. 2:8-9), would

be to deny the gospel. To deny the trinitarian nature of God, or the deity of Christ or His perfect humanity, would be to deny the gospel. We do not practice God's love if we set aside such important truths for the sake of unity. It would not be loving for a doctor to give a lot of hugs to a person with cancer, if he did not warn them of their serious condition and seek to provide the cure.

The connection between what John says in 4:1-6 and his abrupt change of subject in 4:7ff. stems from 3:23: "This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us." In 4:1-6, John explains the first part of that commandment, namely, believing in the name of His Son Jesus Christ. Now, he turns to the second part of the commandment, the need to love one another. He tells us why we *must* love one another:

We must love one another because God is love and He showed it by sending His Son as the propitiation for our sins.

John states the commandment and gives the reason for it (4:7-8). Then he points us to the supreme illustration of love in the whole world, the Father's love in sending His Son to die for our sins (4:9-10). Then he restates the commandment in light of God's great love (4:11). He will go on to show how love for one another is evidence of God's abiding in us and our abiding in Him (4:12-16). And, he shows (4:17-21) that love for one another is evidence that we are mature in our love for God.

1. We should love one another because God is love (4:7-8).

Twice (4:7, 11) John practices what he preaches by addressing his readers as "beloved." Of course, genuine love requires much more than calling someone tender names, but John's readers knew him to be a man who practiced love for them. His words and his behavior were in harmony.

Our culture uses the word "love" in many different ways: "I love pizza!" "I love the mountains!" "I love my children." We often think that love is a sentimental, syrupy feeling. So we need to remember the biblical definition of love. Based on several similar texts (John 3:16; 13:34; Eph. 5:2, 25; 1 John 4:9-10), I worked out this definition: *Biblical love is a self-sacrificing, caring commitment that shows itself in seeking the highest good of the one loved.*

At its heart, biblical love is a *commitment*, and thus it may be commanded. But it is not a commitment without feeling, but a *caring* commitment. In other words, biblical love involves delight, not just duty. Also, this caring commitment is not just an attitude, but an action: it *shows itself* in deeds. Those deeds often require *self-sacrifice*, seen supremely in Jesus' going to the cross. The goal of this commitment is *the highest good of the one loved*, which is that the person be saved and be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Thus biblical love allows for loving correction when needed.

John shows us the source of genuine love and then draws an inevitable conclusion:

- A. God is the source of genuine love, because it comes from His very nature.

John states (4:7) that, "love is from God," and then he goes farther and states (4:8) that, "God is love." Of course, even unbelievers may demonstrate sacrificial love for others. Unbelieving parents often sacrificially love their children or their mates. Unbelieving soldiers may lay down their lives for their comrades. These loving deeds stem from God's common grace.

While such love is caring and self-sacrificing, it never can be *genuinely* biblical, because unbelievers cannot seek the *highest* good of the one loved, namely, that the other person may come to saving faith and conformity to Christ. John wants us to know that whenever we see genuine biblical love, it did not originate with the person. It came from God. He is the only source of love in the world.

John goes even farther when he states, "God is love." Almost everyone readily embraces that concept, but it is often misunderstood and taken to unbiblical extremes. Some misconstrue it to mean that because God is love, He overlooks or is tolerant toward sin. Some go so far as to say that because God is love, He could never condemn anyone to the eternal punishment of hell.

But the Bible is clear that God's love does not negate His holiness and justice, or vice versa. In 1 John 1:5, the apostle stated, "God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." John also has said, "He is righteous" (2:29). God's holiness and His love are both a part of His nature, and neither negates the other. In Revelation 20:15, the apostle of love writes about the final and eternal con-

demnation of all whose names were not found written in the book of life, that they were thrown into the lake of fire. So John did not see any contradiction between the concept that “God is love” and the concept of His punishment of the wicked in hell. So while it is vital that we affirm, “God is love,” it is also vital that we affirm, “God is holy,” and, “God is the righteous judge.”

We also need to think biblically about the statement, “God is love.” On the surface, it sounds simple, but when you begin to consider all that Scripture teaches on this, it gets rather difficult. D. A. Carson wrote a perceptive little book, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* [Crossway]. He points out (pp. 16-19) that the Bible speaks about God’s love in at least five different ways:

(1) *The peculiar love of the Father for the Son, and of the Son for the Father* (John 3:35; 5:20; 14:31; 17:24). (2) *God’s providential love over all that he has made*. He cares for all of His creation, so that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without His permission. (3) *God’s salvific stance toward his fallen world*. God so loved *the world* that he gave His Son (John 3:16). Carson argues (p. 17, correctly, I think), “On this axis, God’s love for the world cannot be collapsed into his love for the elect.” (4) *God’s particular, effective, selecting love toward his elect*. Many passages in both the Old and New Testaments affirm this aspect of His love (Deut. 7:7-8; Rom. 9:13). (5) *God’s love is sometimes said to be directed toward his own people in a provisional or conditional way—conditioned, that is, on obedience*. Jesus tells us (John 14:21), “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him.”

I might add that, perhaps another aspect of Christ’s love was His special love for the apostle John, who refers to himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved (John 13:23). Of course Jesus loved all of the disciples with a special love (John 13:1), but He loved John in a unique sense.

Carson goes on (pp. 21-24) to point out that if we do not recognize these various aspects of God’s love, and we make any one of them absolute, exclusive, or controlling all the others, we will get into difficulty. If all that we talk about is God’s love for the whole world, we end up with a God so weak that He can’t intervene to save us according to His sovereign purpose. On the other hand, if

we only speak of God's love for His elect, we will not be able to offer the gospel freely to sinners.

At the same time, Carson points out that we must not compartmentalize the various loves of God, as if they were each independent of the others. We must integrate these truths in biblical proportion and balance. And, he argues, we must be careful about various evangelical clichés. For example, to say that God's love is unconditional is true if you are referring to His elective love, but it is not true with regard to His disciplining love of His people. A sinning Christian needs to understand that he abides in God's love only when he obeys God.

So, the seemingly simple statement, "God is love," is not quite so simple after all! But John wants us to know that the foundation for our love for one another is God, who is the source of love and whose very nature is love.

B. God's true children display His nature.

John states this both positively and negatively (4:7-8): "everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God...." Some find significance in the fact that John does not repeat the phrase "is born of God" in the negative statement, but I do not. All that are born of God know God. The false teachers claimed to know God in a secret, deeper sense, but John is saying that they do not know God at all. They are not born again, because they do not practice biblical love. Their teaching and their behavior simply promoted self, not Christ.

John's main application here is that children take on the characteristics of their parents. If we have been born of the God who is love, and thus have come to know Him, we will be growing in love. Or, the opposite is also true. The one who does not love shows that he does not know God.

We need to take this to heart in a serious way. There are many in evangelical churches that claim to be born again, but they do not love others and they do not even make an effort to do so. They are angry, unkind, impatient, abusive in their speech, self-centered in their daily lives, and judgmental of others. They spread malicious gossip with great delight, and they are defensive if you try to point out any of these sins to them. Of such people, Martyn Lloyd-Jones

says (*The Love of God* [Crossway], p. 45), "Oh, my heart grieves and bleeds for them ...; they are pronouncing and proclaiming that they are not born of God. They are outside the life of God; ... there is no hope for such people unless they repent and turn to Him." John's first point is, because God is love, if we are His true children, then we must love one another.

2. God showed His love by sending His Son as the propitiation for our sins (4:9-10).

John makes two points in verses 9-10:

A. God's love is seen in us in that He sent His Son so that we might live through Him (4:9).

John's point here seems to be that we, as God's born again children, are Exhibit A of His great love that sent His only begotten Son to this wicked world. "Only begotten" focuses on the uniqueness of Jesus in relationship to the Father. He alone is the eternal Son of God, who existed in the beginning with God (John 1:1). We who were rebels, dead in our sins, did not deserve to have Him come to this world to redeem us. Why did He come? To display or manifest His great love in us, to His glory (Eph. 1:3-12)!

John says that Jesus came to this world "so that we might live through Him." Christianity is not primarily a matter of a person deciding to stop certain sinful practices and to start doing morally acceptable practices. It is not a matter of changing from being a non-religious person who spends Sundays for himself, to becoming a regular churchgoer. Rather, at its heart, Christianity is a matter of God imparting new life to those who are dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1-5). That new life manifests itself in loving behavior. As born again people who have experienced God's love, we should display His love to this wicked world that crucified the Son of God.

B. Love is truly seen, not in our loving God, but in His loving us by sending His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (4:10).

So that we don't get our focus on ourselves, or get puffed up with pride over how loving we are, John directs us back to God's love as seen in His sending His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. "Propitiation" means to satisfy God's justice and wrath toward our sin. His love didn't just brush aside our sin, because His

holiness and justice would have been compromised. Rather, His love moved God to send His own Son, who bore the penalty that we rightly deserved. The initiative was *totally* with God! He didn't wait until we showed some promise of changing or until we cried out for help. Rather, as Paul put it (Rom. 5:8), "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

Since God has so loved us, John's conclusion is inescapable:

3. Therefore, we ought to love one another (4:11).

"Ought" implies obligation or commandment. That love can be commanded shows that it is not primarily a feeling, but rather an action based on commitment. As I said, love is not devoid of feeling, but it is not based on it. We must love others or we are being disobedient to God.

If everyone were easy to love, we wouldn't need this powerful example of God's love or this strong exhortation to love one another. The world loves those that love them. But Jesus commands us to love even our enemies (Matt. 5:43-47).

Implicit in what John is saying here is that we must love those who may not be especially lovable or easy to love. If I may speak hypothetically (I'm sure that no one can relate to this!), you may have a mate that is self-centered and difficult to live with. John says, "Beloved, if God so loved you, you also ought to love that difficult mate." There may be people in this church whom you do not like. John says, "Beloved, if God so loved you, you also ought to love that difficult person." It is in these difficult situations that God's amazing love in Christ shines forth in us. If you're having trouble loving someone, remember that God loved you while you were yet a sinner. He sent His Son to a world that is filled with sin. If you are His child through the new birth, then you must be the channel for His love to flow to those who may not be very lovable.

Conclusion

I read an amazing story that came out of the Korean War. A young Communist officer ordered the execution of a Christian civilian. When he learned that his prisoner was in charge of an orphanage and was doing much good in caring for small children, he

decided to spare his life, but kill his son instead. The 19-year-old boy was shot in the presence of his father.

Later, when the tide of events changed, this same officer was captured, tried, and condemned to death for war crimes. But before the sentence could be carried out, the Christian father pleaded for the life of this Communist who had killed his son. He admitted that if justice were followed, this man should be executed. But since he was so young and blindly idealistic, he probably thought that his actions were right. "Give him to me," he said, "and I'll teach him about the Savior."

They granted the request. That father took the murderer of his son into his own home. As a result of his self-sacrificing love, that Communist became a Christian pastor ("Our Daily Bread," April, 1980).

Thankfully, most of us will never have to go through that kind of ordeal! But, if God so loved us, shouldn't we work at loving one another in our homes and in this church, even when it is difficult?

Application Questions

1. How can we determine when doctrinal issues are significant enough that we can no longer work with professing Christians?
2. Practically, how should we show love to a difficult person? Do we confront his sin or overlook it? Where are the boundaries?
3. Why is it important to think carefully about the different ways that the Bible speaks of God's love? What errors result if we ignore these differences? How do we integrate them?
4. Since no one loves perfectly, how do we apply verses 7 & 8? How much love must we demonstrate to know that we are born again?

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