

## Testing Love

1 John 4:7-21

October 3, 2010

John has been alternating between two topics: the love that is to be evident among the people of God in the church and the false teachers who bring a message other than the one Jesus lived and the apostles preached. The result is a contrast between the love for God and each other that marks the body of Christ and the selfish ambition and sinful lusts that mark the world. As John continues, he places that contrast before us. He calls us to live out of the love that God places in His people. John also defines love as one of the ways we know we are God's people.

This morning's text begins with a now familiar command, "*Let us love one another, for love comes from God.*" (v.7) John places the origin of love squarely in **God**. The implication of this whole passage is that, without God, there would be no love. Again, we must understand what John means by love. He's not talking about falling in love and having lustful thoughts for another person. He is not talking about the attraction of the heart and affections for other people. He is not even talking about the relationship between best friends. For John, and the whole of scripture, **love** is the commitment to act in another's best interests even when doing so may bring harm to you. That is love as God, and His people, understand it. It is the love that God has for us. It is the love that comes from God. It is the love of which John wrote, "*Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.*" (v.7) It should now be obvious that is the case because it is only the indwelling of the Holy Spirit

that can actually make us want to take harm on ourselves in order to help someone who is not related to us, even someone who is our enemy.

The other side is that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit will make us love. We cannot love if we are not in Christ. If we are in Christ, then we cannot not love—we must love. It is our new nature that God has placed in us. We need to live it out and not fight it by sticking with our old habits which are of the world.

The reason those who are in Christ, and thus have the Holy Spirit in them, must love is that God is love. We have to be careful here, this gets misunderstood in two ways. First, we believe that God is love according to our messed up definition of love and to the exclusion of the stronger statements that God is holy and righteous. To say that God is love is not to say that He is full of sappy emotions about us and only wants what makes us happy. He is absolutely giddy over those who please Him and live the lives He wants them to live. Jesus taught that heaven throws a party every time even one sinner repents. But it is not an emotional response that John is concerned with here. God is love in the sense that it is part of His nature to work for the redemption and salvation of His people, and to continue to work for their benefit, even though doing so will cost Him dearly, even experiencing the pain of the punishment of our sin, and even though as He does this work they continue to reject Him and treat Him as their enemy. Jesus' command to love our enemies sounds wrong, until we realize that God loved us when we were His enemies. God's love is not about His **emotions**.

The other way we are tempted to misunderstand the statement that God is love is to reverse it. Since God is love, we sometimes come to the conclusion that our messed up ideas of love are God. This has some roots in the eastern understanding that there is a spiritual connection to the divine in sex. Indeed, the Bible describes the sex act as joining two people and making them one, so there is a spiritual reality and unity about sex in the scriptures, but not with God. This misunderstanding also works out in our culture's insistence on following our hearts rather than God's commands. This is why marriage is so important and our society's (and the modern church's) low view of it is so damaging. It is not the case that everything we experience, call, or think of as love is from God or is a pathway to Him. God gave us emotions, but we are not to be ruled by them as if they infallibly point us to Him, or we find Him in them. Love is **not** God, nor is it the pathway to Him. That is a lie that will draw you away from the only true path to God and real love.

God **is** love. Look at how John defines this great truth for us. In verses nine and ten he wrote, *"This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."* In His nature, God is holy and righteous and cannot look upon sin. As we said a few minutes ago, it is also in His nature to do what it takes to remove our sin so that He can be in relationship with us. That is love. That is what John means. The all holy, all mighty, righteous, just God acts for our benefit, treating us not as we deserve,

but putting on His Son the punishment for our sin so that He can come to us in mercy and grace instead of justice and wrath. The Son knew death so that we might not have to know it and instead might know life. Indeed, God is love!

John takes this truth of God's love as our example in how we ought to love one another. Since God has shown us His love in this way, we ought to love **one another** in the same way. Another way of saying this is that I ought to love you just as God loves you, and you ought to love me just as God loves me. If we can do this, it is proof that God is in us. As we do it, His love is made complete in us. Loving one another with God's love is the only way we can really come to know how much He loves us. In sacrificially giving of ourselves to love each other, we begin to get a sense of how much God loves us.

Stating this same truth in another way, John wrote, *"We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit."* (v.13) The evidences of our life in God are the change in our **hearts** that the Spirit makes and the outward shift in our **behavior** that follows.

We saw last week that one test of the sources from which we learn is whether or not they say that Jesus came in the flesh. We realized that, more than acknowledging that specific fact, the deeper issue was whether or not they hold to the truth about Jesus. This week, we see the other side of that. It is also essential that we, and the people to whom we listen, acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God. Both His humanity and His

divinity have to be acknowledged or we are believing the wrong thing.

If we are in God, and God lives in us, then we know and rely on the love God has for us. I find it awesome that John says we rely on God's love. We rely on God. We rely on His justice, holiness, faithfulness, and righteousness and all His other attributes, but we can only rely on them because of His love. We rely on the forgiveness He offers because of His love. We rely on His mercy that is only available to us because of His love. *"We know and rely on the love God has for us."* (v.16)

John repeats the guiding truth for this passage. *"God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him."* (v.16) John is trying as hard as he can to drive home that the community of the **faithful** will be marked by the fact that we treat each other the way in which God has treated us: not out of selfish motives, personal agendas, or attempts to manipulate or impose our power or authority over each other, but out of deep and real concern for each other and that we might live the most holy and righteous lives we can live. If we live in love with each other and the world around us, then we know we belong to God. If we love one another, we will be confident on the day of judgement. If we live Jesus' life, then we will have nothing to fear because we loved God's people the way He loves them. This is what John was getting at when he wrote, *"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."* (v.18)

John then turned to the source of love. There is only one reason we can love God. There is only one reason we can love one another with the self-sacrificing kind of love we have been talking about. *"We love because he first loved us."* (v.19) We can only love God or each other because we have already come to know the love of God for us. It sets the example, but it also does far more than that. Because our loving relationship with God removes fear of punishment from Him, we are free to love in the way He created us to love. This is a working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Through the Spirit's witness to us of the Father's love, and the transformation He works in us through that love, He calls us out of fear into love for God and the people around us.

It is God who created the world so He could love us and be loved in return. It is God who began the work of restoring fallen humanity when Adam and Eve sinned. It is God who, time and again throughout the history of His people, sought to call them back to Himself, reminding them of His love for them. It is God the Father who sent God the Son to die as the sacrifice required for our sins. It is God the Son who willingly and freely chose to die. It is God who calls the sinner and washes him clean of the filth of sin. If you have any heart or desire for God at all, then don't doubt for a moment that He loves you. Even though your life should fall apart, live in the knowledge that God loves those who come to Him and He will work out everything in their lives as a demonstration of His love and faithfulness. If we are in Christ, then we can be absolutely certain that God loves us, and we will love in

return. The only response to truly recognizing the love God has shown us is pouring out our hearts and lives for Him, for the others He loves, and for the mission He has for us. We do this, we love Him and each other, because He loved us first and has demonstrated that love for us in Jesus Christ.

This is so true that, if we do not love one another, if we do not really care for each other and act for the benefit of the others in the church, then we are lying when we claim we love God. If we love God then we will love the **people** God loves. We see each other. We can talk with each other and hear one another's needs. We don't all have to be great friends, though we should have good friends within the body of Christ. John's point is that, if we can see each other's faces and hear of each other's needs, and not respond in caring ways, then how can we say we love God whom we have not seen?

We will watch John develop this thought next week. For now, we sum up with John's reminder that, even if love did not naturally grow out of God's love and redeeming work for and in us, it is His command. It is a command He has given His people a natural inclination to follow, but it is His command nonetheless. We are to follow the natural urging of the new heart He has placed within us and which the Holy Spirit is seeking to grow. If we do, in fact, love God, then we must love those whom God loves and for whom Jesus died. This is one of the tests for the people of God. Our love for each other demonstrates our love for God and our obedience to Him. It is a test for whether or not His love is within us.