

“GOD’S WAY TO LOVE”

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Text: 1 John 4:7-21

God’s Word: Matthew 5:43-48

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⁷ Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. ⁸ But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

⁹ God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. ¹⁰ This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

¹¹ Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. ¹² No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.

¹³ And God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us. ¹⁴ Furthermore, we have seen with our own eyes and now testify that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ All who declare that Jesus is the Son of God have God living in them, and they live in God. ¹⁶ We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love.

God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. ¹⁷ And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the Day of Judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world.

¹⁸ Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love. ¹⁹ We love each other because he loved us first.

²⁰ If someone says, “I love God,” but hates a fellow believer, that person is a liar; for if we don’t love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see? ²¹ And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their fellow believers.

While in seminary, I attended a large downtown United Methodist Church in Columbus. We came from just about every ethnic group and socio-economic background. I had started a Children’s Ministry at the church and had a volunteer—a Mom who was willing to help me. She was a single mom. Active in the church. She had no job, was living with her boyfriend who also had no job, she had 2 small children from 2 different men and was now pregnant with a third.

Knowing that I wouldn't even think about having a child if I weren't somewhat financially stable and at an age where I thought I could provide a somewhat stable home, I asked her: "Why do so many young women in your situation keep having so many babies?" We had a close enough relationship so that I could ask her such intimate questions. Her answer broke my heart: "Because we want somebody who will love us."

There can be no doubt that love is the universal hunger in our human hearts, but our world is terribly confused about love. Someone wrote about this, graffiti-style, on a restroom wall...it read, "Love is all I want." Underneath it someone else had scribbled, "Sex is all you get."

The love that is talked about in our Scripture Lesson for this morning is so unique that the early Christians had to take an old colorless Greek word that was barely used and adopt it for their own purposes. That word is agape. Agape is love that gives without expecting a return. It gives sacrificially and unconditionally. God is love, agape love. And Jesus died for us as the supreme example of agape love.

And we are called to agape love one another because of this. 1 John 4:19 tells us, *"We love each other because [God] loved us first,"* and verse 10 says, *"This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins."*

In other words, our human, finite and often very self-centered concept of love does not define who God is. Rather, God in God's love defines us!!! *"God is love,"* and we see this love in action by what God has done on our behalf!!!

"God is love." John tells it like it is!!! John might have said that God is power or order or goodness. In our insecurity and longing for protection, we often yearn for a God Who will protect us from all harm. In a world of moral confusion, we might wish for a God Who lays down the Law with complete clarity and holds everyone accountable, catching the cheaters and rewarding the faithful. In our hunger to possess things, we might even want a God of prosperity, a God Who promises to make us rich if we obey a few principles.

But whatever may be true about God's power or God's moral order or generosity...John avoids all these descriptions in favor of the simple word agape or love. It's not power or law or prosperity, but instead, self-sacrificing love that is at the heart of the truth about who God is!!! And what could be better than this?

This passage of Scripture sheds light on the false theology of those who try and steal the Church or hijack Christianity for their own purposes...whether it be politics or corrupt systems or false preachers.

In 1 John Chapter 4 we are able to see Who God is, how God chooses to reveal God's self, how we are strengthened and empowered to do God's work, and what God's work is for us!!!

And that is a big reason why, as Christians we need to know the Scriptures—especially the New Testament. Because God is Love. And God’s love isn’t just some abstract idea. We come to know God’s love only when the love of God flows through us.

Verse 8 tells us, *“But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.”* Love is action. Love is lived. It’s not enough just to know about Jesus’ self-sacrifice. We must live it. Because to know the God of love is to live the love of God!!!

A wealthy woman visited Mother Theresa in Calcutta and offered to write a check to support the work of the Sisters of Charity. Mother Teresa declined: “I won’t take your money.” The woman insisted, reminding her that she had tons of money to donate. But Mother Teresa still said, “No money.” Exasperated, the woman stammered, “Well, what can I do?” Mother Teresa said, “Come and see.”

She led the woman by the hand down into a horrible part of town, found a desperately dirty, hungry child, and asked the woman to take care of him. So the woman took a cloth and a water basin and bathed the child. Then she spooned cereal into the child’s mouth. Later, the woman said that this changed her life. She became part of something money could not buy, fix or replace. God’s agape love is personal, tangible. It must be lived to be experienced.

The daughter of the founder of the Salvation Army was cleaning the sores of a very sick person. Someone walked up to her and said, “I wouldn’t do that for a million dollars.” “Neither would I,” replied Evangeline Booth.

John writes, *“If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us. This is how we know and remain in him and he remains in us, because he has given us a measure of his Spirit.”*

John Wesley, the Founder of the Methodist Movement, loved to talk about what he called the “witness of the Spirit.” This was Wesley’s way of being assured of one’s salvation, to quote from one of his sermons he said, *“the [witness] of the Spirit is an inward impression on the soul whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit that I am a child of God—that Jesus Christ loves me and gave himself for me, that all my sins are blotted out, and that even I have been reconciled to God.”* Do you have that “Witness” this morning?

Wesley goes on to write that the disposition or characteristics of those who are saved is “A loving heart toward God and toward all others...”

Again, our Scripture informs us, *“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates a fellow believer, that person is a liar...Those who love God must also love their fellow believers.”* Love and hate cannot mix. We are lying to ourselves if we claim we can love and hate at the same time.

Way back in Matthew Chapter 5 Jesus laid down what many refer to as “The Law of Love.” *“You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! ...If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much...But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.”*

One of the most difficult and nearly impossible things in the world is to love those who do not love us back. Or to love those who treat us poorly. But you know, when God first loves us, we are unlovely and unloving toward God. God loves us long before we become God’s children. And it is God’s love that transforms us. Because we are loved by God, we become children of God.

Note that the love of God comes first, long before we are worth being loved or have any idea what real love is. And our love for others should be like God’s love for us. Like God, we are called to love people who are unlovely or unresponsive to our love. We are commanded to love the person or persons who are angry, mean, unloving, and hurtful. And only when we do this, are we able to see for ourselves what God’s agape love is really like!!! When the love of God flows through us and transforms us and others, then we know God!

John goes on to write that *“Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love.”* There is no need to fear God, or to live in fear, if we are loving God and living in love. But if fear, rather than love is the foundation of our lives we will be paralyzed. Fear can’t create love, sympathy, compassion, or tenderness. We can’t scare people into being truly kind.

Instead, the fruit of fear can be seen all across our world. The fruit of fear is murder, distrust, suspicion and resentment, envy and so many other awful things.

But the fruit of love is confidence. It’s been said that against the lovelessness of fear, is the fearlessness of love!!!

An old Gospel song says, “that old time religion makes us love everybody.”

And it really is true. Within genuine Christianity there really is no place for grudges, for those who seek revenge, assume that they are superior, or are careless of the feelings of others.

Of course, Christianity is a journey for life. It is a constant molding and moving toward the perfection that is Christ. But we must remind ourselves daily that only the merciful are sure of mercy, and only the forgiving are sure of forgiveness.

And only the loving heart lives in the love of God.