

1 John 4:7-21
(Leviticus 19:17-18; John 15:12-17)
“Beloved, Let Us Love One Another”

Introduction

Of the three tests that John has introduced, the three spiritual vital signs by which we may know whether or not eternal life is at work in our mortal bodies, the greatest is the relational test of love. This is the third time he has introduced this theme, and each time he has taken us deeper. Now, he takes us to the heart of the matter and gives us five reasons why we should love one another.

It is a theme of poets and musicians that love is what we most need to thrive, that a life lived without love, no matter how wealthy or powerful or prestigious, is a sad and empty life. I'm not talking about *Eros*, romantic love – delightful as that may be – but rather about *Agape*, self-giving, lasting relationships of steadfast love that can take the poorest, most broken life and make it a thing of beauty.

John begins this passage by demonstrating his love for those to whom he writing: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” (4:7). He is saying, “I love you. And you should love one another, because God is the source of love, and our love for one another is the supreme mark that we have been born of God – in other words that God’s Spirit is alive and active in us – and that we actually know God, not merely know things about God.”

He then develops this theme by reminding us of who God is and of what God has done for us. He tells us how we can know and actually experience the reality of the things we profess to believe and how we can make the invisible God visible to those around us. And he tells us how we can face the present and future unafraid of whatever comes.

Body

1. We should love one another because of who God is: God is love (4:8).

Because *agape* love, that is, self-sacrificial love, is at the very heart of who God is, it is impossible to be a child of God and still have a heart full of bitterness and hatred. That does not mean that we don't feel the wound of being wronged or abused by another, or that we simply lie down and say, “Kick me again.” But it means that, even to those who seek to be our enemies, we hold out the offer of grace and forgiveness and reconciliation, if they are willing repent and reconcile. It also means that we are able to forgive and forgive and forgive again and again, because we know that God does that for

us each day and we would not receive his grace and mercy, and then turn around and deny it to others.

Is there anyone in your life whom you are not willing to forgive? Anyone whom you would enjoy seeing exposed and dishonored? If so, you should ask yourself whether that is how God treats you. We love, first and foremost, because the One whom we dare to call, "Our Father," so loves us that we may say, "God is love."

2. We should love one another because of what God has done for us: He has given his Son to redeem us (4:9-10).

God has demonstrated his love for us in many ways: the glory of the cosmos, the majesty of this good earth, the beauty of art and music, the thrill of adventure, the joy of intimacy, friendship and love. But God has supremely demonstrated his love for us by entering our story in the person of his Son, living the life of love that we are meant to live, suffering the punishment due to us for our rebellion against his grace and mercy, dying our death, entering the grave and kicking down its doors from the inside out, ascending in human flesh to the Father's presence, pouring out his Spirit, his nature, on us who respond to his grace, leading us to freedom and joy and the experience of intimacy with God even now in the present, and giving us the hope of being with him forever in the redeemed cosmos, "the new heaven and earth."

In the light of what he has done to redeem us, of the cost he was willing to pay, how can we doubt that he will finish what he has begun? What should be the response of those who have been so greatly loved? How sad it is for loving parents when they see their children alienated from one another, fighting, arguing, and undercutting each other. What a joy it is when we see our children at peace: loving, caring for, and enjoying each other. So our Father wants us, his children, to love one another as he has loved us.

3. We should love one another because that is how we now experience the reality of his love for us: We cannot see God except in one another (4:11-12).

John points out the obvious: we can't see God except in his deeds, much as we know an artist in her song or painting or poem, or an architect in his buildings. In fact, we only know one another through our deeds, and if those deeds do not vindicate our words, then no one really knows or trusts us. But we can know God and make him known to one another as we become the ones through whom he loves others, not merely in word, but in concrete acts of love, mercy and compassion.

The incarnation did not cease when Jesus returned to the Father. We are the body of Christ in the world, and if we show his love in word and deed, those

who are seeking will find him in our fellowship of faithful love. True Christianity is not a debate but a demonstration, a demonstration of God's steadfast love, his passion for justice tempered with tender mercy, his willingness to forgive and serve, in the lives of those who have been born of his Spirit.

4. We should love one another because that is how we know that we are abiding in him and that his Spirit abides in us: our confession of Christ only becomes real as we abide in him and he in us (4:13-16).

We all fail and at times wonder – if we are at all in tune with ourselves – whether or not we are the real thing. We feel anger flare up, feel the desire for what we know is not from God, hear ourselves speak as we should not speak, and ask ourselves, “Could God’s Spirit be at work in me if I feel such things and say such things?” Of course, it is not wrong to be tempted – that is merely to be human. The author of Hebrews reminds us, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). But what we do with those temptations and desires, the patterns we establish, are what cumulatively create our character, establish our life trajectory, and define the person we are.

John tells us that we who confess Jesus as the Son of God should match that confession with a life that increasingly resembles his life, and the supreme mark of that life was and is self-giving love. As we see the love of God increasingly take charge of our affections and our words and actions, we may have confidence that God’s Spirit is at work within us and is conforming us to the image of Christ, which is the picture of humanity as we were meant to be.

5. We should love one another because that is how we are able to face the future with confidence: love casts out fear and we face even the prospect of God’s judgment unafraid (4:17-18).

And so, as we see God’s Spirit at work within us and know increasingly the love of God flowing through us to others, we need no longer fear the past, old failures and wrongs that otherwise might haunt us and stunt us from pressing on, we need no longer fear the present, because we know that God has invested hugely in our lives and will not be put off his final goal for us, and we need no longer fear the future – even the day of judgment – because the Judge himself is our Father who has paid our debt and set us free to live joyfully in his presence, even now.

So many people pursue religion dutifully because they fear that they might one day have to give account of their lives to God. What a sad and wearisome thing! God invites us into joyful intimacy with him and with one another,

where we know the security of being well loved: “There is no fear in love,” John writes, “but perfect love casts out fear” (4:18).

Conclusion

Finally, John closes with a warning by applying this to the closest relationships of life (4:19-21). If we say that we love God, but fail to love those closest to us (which is what John means by our “brother”), we are deceived. We cannot love God whom we have not seen if we do not love those whom we live with and work with and see every day. Is there anyone from whom you are withholding your love, anyone whom you would wish to see harmed? Let it go! It will destroy you. You cannot harbor resentment and un-forgiveness in your heart and think that you are filled with God’s Spirit. His Spirit will not abide an angry, bitter, unrepentant heart.

This word is for your own spiritual health and joy and peace:

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God” (4:7).

“And this is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother” (4:21).

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