

Jason Upchurch - 1 John 4

This morning as we celebrate the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, I want to spend time thinking about the love of God here from 1 John 4. I think when it comes to talking about God's love, we can become like the crusty old guy who said "I told my wife I loved her when I married her, I'll let her know if that changes. Until then I don't need to keep reminding her."

The reality is that we need to be reminded often of God's love, and it's good for us to express our love to God, no matter how imperfect it might be. I used to think that I couldn't tell God I loved him because my love is far from perfect and so it would be a lie. But I don't love my wife or kids or family perfectly, and yet I tell them I love them. Why? Because it's good and right to express love to each other.

Now, I don't know if this is because I'm a guy or what - but I don't gravitate to the idea of love when it comes to God. Maybe it's because there are a lot of misconceptions about love, and God's love in particular. Whether people paint God's love as something of a romantic love or cheesy. I don't know. But the only reason any of us have eternal life is because of God's love.

Eph. 1:4-5: In love God predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ. Your salvation - your individual salvation - was planned by God in love.

John 3:16: For God so loved the world, he gave his only son that whoever believes will not perish but have eternal life. Your eternal life is wrapped up in the ultimate expression of God's love.

So I want to remind take some time considering the love of God. And let me just say this plainly because I know I don't say this enough: God loves you. The eternal, creator God of the universe who is all glorious and powerful loves you.

Even if you're not a a believer, God loves you. He gives you breath and life and joy and food and rain and sunshine. There's also a sense in which if you're not a believer you are under the wrath of God, the judgement of God. **But** in his love, he's provided a way to take care of that.

And if you are a believer God loves you even more. He loves you more than a husband could love his wife, he loves you more than a parent could love their children. The Father has an eternal covenantal love for you exactly like he has for Jesus his Son and the Holy Spirit.

And the apostle John here gives us some of the greatest insight into the love of God in all of Scripture. It's profound and it is practical. Now, if you've read 1 John recently you know that John's style is a little different than what we're used to. Most of us like simple plain arguments. We like outlines and logical flows. John likes to stack his arguments over and over again.

You ever play the hand stack game with little kids? You put your hand on the table, then the person next to you puts a hand on, then the next and so on? Then everyone stacks their other hand on top and then you pull your hand out of the bottom and put it on top, and round and round it goes?

Well, that's kind of how John explains God's love here. He repeats things to show how they are connected to everything else. So he'll show us that God's love is connected to the cross. The cross is connected to our love for each other. And our love for each other is connected to God's love, which is shown in the cross. And round and round it goes.

That's how John talks about love. He has three points that he overlaps over and over. Were going to take each point individually and then hopefully by the end the whole thing will all come together.

1) God's Very Nature is Love.

I don't know what comes to mind when you think about God. Maybe he seems like a really strict parent to you and you've got to toe the line or he'll blast you. Maybe you think God is irritated with you because you're not living up to his standards. Maybe he seems so holy and glorious that he's not personal to you.

But whatever else might come to mind when we think of God, John says his very nature is actually love. **Read 8, 16**

1 John 4:8: ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν. Literally, God love is. In English the word order matters otherwise the sentence doesn't make sense. In Greek, not as much. In Greek, the word order is often changed for emphasis. Mt. Everest tall is. Ocean deep is. God love is. He does that same word order in both **Vs. 8** and **16**.

By the way, you can't flip that order, it's not a two way street. God is love - we can say that. But we can't say that love is God. It doesn't work in the grammar and it doesn't work with what the rest of the Bible says.

There are a lot of people who think as long as they love other people they don't need to really concern themselves with God. Well, the problem with that is that the only way we even know what love is is because of God. You can't define true love unless you know who God is and how he defines love. **Read 7**

Love is from God. We have to be commanded to love because it's not natural for us. In our natural state we love those who love us and hate those who hate us. God calls us to love even our enemies because that's what he does. God doesn't have to be commanded or encouraged to love because he is the definition of love. He is love and everything he does is love.

And any love that we are able to muster up is because he first loved us. **Read 19**

God initiates love with people. He doesn't wait for them to love him first. That would never happen anyway because we are by nature enemies of God. As believers, any act of love that we perform is only because the grace of God to love us first.

And this is what we see about God's character throughout the Bible. I come back to the statement that God makes about himself to Moses when he passes by Moses so that Moses can see the afterglow of his glory because it's so important for understanding who God is.

I am Yahweh, Yahweh, a God gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast what? Love and faithfulness. Keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty. He goes on.

You know when you go in for an interview usually one of the classic interview questions is: Tell me about yourself. It's sort of an icebreaker question but in it you've got about 30 seconds to tell the person the most important attributes about yourself. And these attributes are going to effect your relationship from that point forward.

Moses has about 30 seconds to see the awesome glory of God. And as Moses sees this veiled glory God tells Moses about himself.

God says he **abounds** in steadfast love - the idea is that God's love just overflows, it keeps pouring out. And it pours out to thousands thousands. There's just no limit.

You ever been to Golden Coral or a really good buffet? They've got steak and burritos and rice and lasagna and cake and pie and ice cream and salad and bread and on and on. The food just keeps coming and no matter how many people keep coming, the food just keeps coming. They make more than anyone will ever be able to eat. That's the idea of abounding in love.

God is abounding in love. Love is from God. Whatever we know about love and how love works is from God. Anyone who has ever done any act of kindness or grace or goodness has only done so because they are made in the image of God and are reflecting God's own nature to other people.

At this point we kind of need to stop and ask: what is love? This is his nature and he's got a lot of it. But what is love? Does that just mean he's nice? Is he just a more powerful version of Santa?

No. God is agape - self-sacrificing, self-giving love. There are 3 words for love in Greek, only 2 are used in the Bible. Eros is not used in the Bible, and it refers to a romantic attraction, a sexual attraction. The other 2 words are agape and phileo. A lot of people try to make a huge difference between the 2 words, but in reality there isn't a whole lot of distinction. They are often used interchangeably in the Bible. Maybe we could say phileo emphasizes a natural, friendly affection that friends have whereas agape extends to friends and enemies alike. Both are used about God, here it's just agape.

We could quote **1 Cor. 13**: Love is patient, love is kind, love keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not envy or boast, it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way.

But those are really ways in which we love. God does insist on his own way. He does boast because he's...God. He does keep a record of wrongs, for those who are not believers.

So what is God's love?

God's love is gracious. Grace is a gift that is not deserved. God gives us life and breath and everything - none of which we deserve. As sinners we only deserve eternal judgment in hell. So every breath we take, every beat of our heart. Every good meal we enjoy. Every friend or family we have is pure grace. And God gives it.

Jas. 1: 17: Every good and perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights. God just gives and gives and gives.

God's love is merciful. Mercy is just the opposite of grace: mercy is withholding a consequence you deserve. We've all experienced times in our lives where we did something that deserved punishment. We knew, God knew, maybe others knew - and for whatever reason we were shown mercy. We didn't receive the punishment we deserved.

God does this all the time. I mean, how often do we really feel the full consequences of our sins? Or any consequence of our sins? You realize that God could set up our life where it worked like instant karma, right? We say something sinful and all of a sudden we go mute for 2 hours. "Why's John not talking?" "Oh, he yelled at his wife this morning." Or we covet something and we go blind for 2 hours. Hope you don't see a sports car on the freeway.

We sin all the time and God is merciful.

God's love is sacrificial. A sacrifice is something that you give at a cost to yourself for a greater good. In baseball a sacrifice play is where you bunt and get out so that your teammate can get one more base. You don't get glory for bunting. You don't get honor. It hurts your stats. But you do it at your own cost for the greater prize: the success of the team.

Sacrifice is a good lead in to the second point that John makes here:

2) God's Love is Shown Most Fully in the Cross.

So God's nature is love, and God's love is shown most fully in the cross. John's basic point is this: If you're not sure that God is love, just look at the sacrifice he made on the cross. God the Father sacrificed God the Son on the cross as an act of love toward sinful people. John sandwich's these truths in between all the others. **Read 9-10, 14, 16-17**

How do we know God is love? Because God sent his Son into the world. God sent Jesus into the world on a rescue mission. I think most of us like rescue mission stories. I like military stories where the special ops guys sneak in behind enemy lines, almost get caught but they don't, there's action, there's intrigue, and they get their buddies home safely.

That's not the rescue mission God does. God's rescue mission is greater. God's rescue mission was a rescue mission for his enemies. And he knew full well going into it that he would sacrifice his Son.

Verse 9 makes this truth beautifully. **Read**

Jesus came that we might live. What does it mean to live? Aren't we alive? Well, we are alive in our flesh but spiritually we are born dead. What that means is that because of sin we have no capacity or love for God. And left to ourselves we would die in our sins and face the eternal wrath of God in hell.

But in love God sent his Son that we might live. Eternal life is not just living forever in heaven enjoying God. It includes that. But eternal life is actually knowing God personally. We know the Father, we know the Son, through the Holy Spirit. It's having an intimate knowledge of the God who saved us. And that knowledge of his love ultimately leads to an eternity seeing him face to face.

How did that happen? How did Jesus accomplish that when he came into the world? John says it happened through propitiation. **Read 10**

If you have the NIV I think it says atoning sacrifice. Others have propitiation. Propitiation is a big word, but it's an important word. It's a sacrifice that removes wrath.

And this is where the depth of God's love is shown. Because in Jesus, God satisfies his own wrath toward us by sacrificing his Son. I said earlier that God loves unbelievers, and he does. He shows all people some measure of kindness. Almost because he can't help himself. It's just his nature.

But the rub is that we're also sinners and because of that we are by nature children of God's wrath. God is rightly and justly angry with the wicked every day because of their sin. When we sin, it is a personal attack on God who made us and owns us and determines what we should and should not do. And so we all justly deserve his wrath; full force for all eternity.

And see, this is the depth of the love of God. He sends his Son to take his own wrath for us, guilty sinners. This is what's happening on the cross. Jesus is dying a physical death. He was beaten and tortured. And hanging on the cross unable to catch his breath. And eventually he dies.

But spiritually what happened was that he came because the Father sent him as a sacrifice to remove his own wrath. The Father gave his Son up for us when he didn't have to and when we deserved wrath. That is love.

I have to tell you, I love you guys, but I am not giving up even one of my children for you. I might lay my own life down for you, but I'm sacrificing them. But look at the verse. **Read 10**

If you ever wonder whether or not God loves you, just look at the cross. God doesn't love you because you did all your devotions this week. He doesn't love you because you tithed. And he's not mad at you because you weren't perfect. God loves you no demonstrates that unmerited love through having sent his Son to take the punishment we deserved for our sins.

That's love. And it's a rescue operation. **Read 14**

Jesus is the Savior of the world. That doesn't mean everyone is saved or will be saved. The Bible doesn't teach universalism where everyone eventually ends up in heaven. What it means is that there's only one way to have forgiveness, one way to have eternal life, one way to escape the wrath of God in hell and that is to turn from your sins and trust that Jesus alone is the Savior. That his death and his resurrection are what saves you from God's wrath.

Really, it's trusting that God has loved you through the sacrifice of Jesus. **Read 15**

This is beautiful. John just told us that Jesus is the Savior, now he's telling us how we can be saved. Confess that Jesus is the Son of God. That his Saving purpose on the cross is your only hope for salvation. If you do that you abide in God, and God abides in you.

And I love what the conclusion then is in **Vs. 16. Read**

John says, look, if you understand and believe that God sent Jesus to give you eternal life, and if you know and believe that Jesus is the sacrifice for your sins, and you understand his whole mission was to save the world. There's only one conclusion you can come to: that you know and believe the love that God has for us.

There's no other conclusion we can make. Why would God do this if it wasn't motivated by love? Why would he sacrifice and bring his enemies near to him? Because he is abounding in steadfast love and mercy. It just flows. That's who God is.

Before we move on, let me ask: How do we know that Jesus's death propitiated the wrath of God? I mean he died, but how do we know his death actually removes the wrath of God for those who believe? The Bible says we know that because of what we celebrate today: that Jesus rose again.

The resurrection is what proves that everything that Jesus did in his suffering and his death worked.

When we were first married I bought a truck. And I didn't have any money so I financed it. And every month I kept sending the bank a check for \$175. I agree to send them the money for a certain amount of time and they agreed to give me the truck. Well, when I made my last payment how did I know that I actually owned the truck? How did I know that all that I had paid actually accomplished anything? Because they sent me a little piece of paper after my last payment that said: Certificate of Title on the top. That proved that everything I had paid had been received and the transaction had been completed.

That's what the resurrection is. It is the proof that Jesus did what he said he would do. It is the proof that he actually did actually remove the wrath of God that we deserve and gives eternal life to those who believe.

Romans 4:25 Says that Jesus was delivered up for our sins and raised for our justification.

Expository Bible Commentary: "Our justification is confirmed or guaranteed by the resurrection."

I know my sins are forgiven and that I'm a child of God because Jesus rose from the dead. This is the love that God has for us.

Signed, sealed, delivered to his enemies, because of his love, all for his glory.

So God's very nature is love. That love is shown most fully on the cross. How does that affect us? That's the third point.

3) God's love is made visible when believers love one another. Read 7

Here's the thing about God's love: if you really believe it, it actually changes you. It just has transforming power. And so if you've been born of God and know God - those are 2 ways of saying the same thing - then your natural inclination is going to be to love other people like God loved you.

It's like you can't help it. If you understand the depth of grace and mercy and kindness that God has shown you, you have to turn around and give that away.

That's what makes the parable of the unmerciful servant so offensive. The king forgives this guy's \$10B debt and he turns around and chokes the guy who owes him \$15K. He's completely missed the lavish love and generosity of the king. Had he truly known the king and understood the grace, he would have forwarded that grace on.

And this is where the gospel has a sanctifying affect. I don't know about you but I have a hard time loving people sometimes. I don't want to love them. I know I'm commanded to love them but after being a Christian for 25 years it's still tough. How do I do this? I remember the gospel.

You remember I said John's argument is like that hand-stack game? That's what he does here. He's telling Christians to love each other. Why? Because God is love, look at the cross. Here's where the whole thing just unfolds. **Read 7-12**

When we understand what he's doing, his point is beautiful. The way any Christian - whether days in the faith or decades in the faith - finds the ability to love is by looking at how God loved us through Jesus.

This never changes. There's no other secret. There's no other way that we will more deeply and truly love one another than to simply stop and consider how God has loved us.

And I love **Vs. 12. Read**

What he's saying is that you can't see God, but there's a sense in which people do see God when we love like God. It's like a balloon floating around. We can't see helium, but I can see a balloon that's full of helium because it floats around. In the same way, I can't see God, but I can see a person full of God's love and that's pretty close.

Once we have these truths down, the rest of the section just really unfolds right before us. **Read 13**

The Holy Spirit is who has brought us into this love that the Father has blessed us with. **Read 14-21**

How do you know you have the Spirit? Because you believe in Jesus and are filled with godly love. That's why he says it's impossible for someone to say that they love God but hate their brother. Because to know God is to know his love and be changed by his love so much that we love even our enemies. And so if we don't love even our brothers, there's no way that we truly love God.

See here's what God wants: He wants the earth to be filled with people who reflect his love to everyone around.

I've flown over Minnesota a couple of times; Minnesota is the land of 10,000 lakes. And if you fly over Minnesota on a clear day you can look down and see all these lakes and they look like mirrors. They reflect the blue of the sky or brightness of the sun. And it's beautiful - just scattered all over.

What God wants in us is a people who know his love deeply and reflect his love generously. That he might be known and glorified as the God who is love.

Pray