

# "Understand What Love Really Looks Like"

1 John 4:7-21

Happy Valentine's Day. This is the day our culture has decreed that we show our appreciation to our special partners. It's a great tradition but if you were a relative stranger to the English language you might be confused by how we use the word love. Suppose someone has immigrated to Canada and their knowledge of English is limited. You take them to a Tim Horton's. You enter the building and you take a deep breath and say 'I love the smell of coffee!' Your friend records this. Then as you drive to your home you remark on the beautiful spring day; 'Oh I love this time of year when everything starts to come to life!' Your friend is puzzled but says nothing.

You arrive home and your dog runs up to you and licks your face. And you say 'Good boy Rex!' And you say 'Oh I love my dog.' Now you're new-to-English friend is really confused. And you top that off with greeting your spouse saying 'Hi honey, we're home.' You kiss her and say 'Love you.'

And you're new friend pulls you aside and says 'I don't understand. You feel the same way about your coffee, the weather, your dog and your spouse the same way??' Then you try to explain how its different with all of them even though you use the same word.

This is part of our problem in English. We don't have different words for 'love' to describe the different kinds of affection or appreciation that we express. Yet in Greek they did. The New Testament was written in Greek and the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. But in Jesus' day the main language was Greek. So 200 years prior to Jesus' arrival, scholars translated the Old Testament into Greek so that the average person could have the Bible in the common language of the day. So God used the nuances of the Greek language to convey specific meaning to the text that sometimes gets lost in the English translations. And the word 'love' in the Bible is a classic example.

As we try to understand what love really looks like from God's perspective, we have to realize that the Greeks had four basic words they used to describe different kinds of love. If I wanted to describe my love for my family I would use the word storge. If I was describing my love for friends I would use the word phileo. If I was describing something I admired physically (an object or a person) I would use the word eros. And if I wanted to describe a selfless act of sacrifice towards another I would use the word agape.

And this is the word God uses to describe His love for us and the way we are to love each other. An unconditional act toward another that benefits them. It is not motivated by emotions but a genuine concern for the other without any reward or reciprocation. So according to God's definition of love, do you and I really 'love one another'?

As we explore God's command for us to 'agape' one another we need to understand some background on John's letter. It's kind of like hearing only side of a conversation. Many of these so-called believers were saying one thing about what they believed but their lifestyle was inconsistent. There's many references to them in the letter but let's highlight the beginning of the letter:

<sup>6</sup> *If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.*

<sup>8</sup> *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*

<sup>10</sup> *If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.*

<sup>2:4</sup> *The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him*

<sup>2:6</sup> *Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.*

So John was writing to believers in Jesus not to be confused by false teachers who didn't believe Jesus was the actual Son of God. That the Messiah was a spirit from God who temporarily came on Jesus and then left before He died. This belief was influenced by Greek mythology because in Greek mythology the gods mostly weren't supposed to mix with mere mortals. So they didn't believe God actually sent His own Son to be human and die for our sins. And they believed, that knowledge was sufficient to 'save' oneself and that your physical ethical life was totally separate from your religious beliefs. Hence, you could believe in God with your mind and live anyway you wanted.

For John – and the rest of the New Testament – true faith in Jesus means you believe He is God's Son, who became one of us, lived and died and rose from the dead paying for our sins. Faith in Him means His Spirit comes in you and assures you of your salvation is not just knowledge, but knowledge backed up by a changed life. And for John, the biggest change came in how you acted and treated one another. So we pick up his statements about what love looks like in 4:7,

<sup>7</sup> *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

So then, what do God's people need to understand what love really looks like? John is challenging us as disciples of Jesus to

## **Love Others the Way God Loves Us** **(4:7-14)**

Sometimes Bible translations reduce the meaning of a word for the sake of readability. And "Dear friends" is one of those places. The word is "beloved", a form of agape. 'Literally, you are agaped, agape one another for God agaped you.' You who are loved, should love others because God loved you. So love others the way God loves us. Sacrificial, selfless giving of Himself for our need (salvation) at His great expense (Jesus' death) which we cannot repay (we can't reciprocate/even the score). It is the nature of God to love us selflessly and sacrificially, knowing we can't repay Him and this is what we are expected to do as His spiritual children. Why?

### ***Because He has recreated us (vv.7-8; 2 Cor. 5:17)***

Remember John, is arguing against a belief system that says you can believe God in your head but it doesn't mean you have to change how you live. John denies that. It doesn't even make sense. It does if you refuse to believe God is a personal God who genuinely cares about you and wants to dwell in you. But John states love others because you are loved by God. You are born of God because God recreated you.

'Born of God' echoes Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. If we want to see the kingdom we need to be reborn. We need a start over. How? By confessing we are sinners and can't atone for our

own sins by our limited good works. When we do that God sends His Spirit into our life and changes our heart. A spiritual makeover. Paul echoes this in 2 Cor. 5:17 when he affirms,

*<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup> that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*

John challenges his readers: are you genuinely born again, with a recreated heart by God based on your belief and trust that Jesus is the Son of God? If you are then let's see your changed heart. Show God you've changed from within; love others the way God loves you; selflessly, sacrificially, meeting their needs at our expense without seeking a reward. And what is the goal of this kind of love according to vv.9-10?

### ***To initiate forgiveness and [help people] truly live (vv.9-10)***

*<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

God took the first step towards reconciling us to Him by sending Jesus to earth to die for our sins. *"But God demonstrated His own love for us in this; while we were still sinners Christ died for us"* (Rom. 5:8).

Agape love (God's way of loving) is to initiate the act of love regardless of whether the person deserves it or not. If you have a relationship that is broken and needs reconciling you need to respond like God. To selflessly take the first steps towards reconciling by offering forgiveness. It is when we are forgiven that we truly live. Jesus said "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). He also said in John 10:10 that *"I have come that you may have life and have it to the full"* (10:10).

Forgiveness frees us. It allows us to live as we should in joy and hope in God. Forgiveness speaks acceptance. When people hold a grudge and refuse to forgive, they always hold that over someone. It imprisons them but also the one unwilling to offer forgiveness. You imprison yourself by your refusal to show God's kind of love, even though you claim you're a child of God. This doesn't make sense, John was saying. You who have been forgiven much yet refuse to forgive less. Like the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matt. 18.

John brings out another added benefit to showing agape love; Godlike love to each other. He says in vv.11-14 its also

### ***To give evidence of God's existence and power (vv.11-14)***

*<sup>11</sup> Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

*<sup>13</sup> We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. <sup>14</sup> And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world*

John says when we love like this we reveal God to a world that can't see Him and doesn't believe in Him. We can't love like this unless our hearts have been changed because of the forgiveness of sins. The Holy Spirit comes into our life and now guides us. He empowers us to love sacrificially and forgive others who may not accept our forgiveness. We reveal the change God has

made in us by acting like Him. And when people say ‘How can you love/forgive like that?’ We explain to them how God has changed us and given us His power to love like He does. And people are blown away and some want to know God for themselves. ‘How can I get what you have? I see the difference God has made in your life even though I don’t see God.’ When we act like the Father to each other, we make the gospel of God sending His Son more attractive and believable to the unsaved. People want something real. Show them faith in Jesus is real by how it changes your heart.

So that’s what agape love does for others. It frees them and makes an effective witness. It frees us too. And John wants to talk about another benefit we get when we love others selflessly and sacrificially.

## **Loving Others Strengthens our Hope** **(4:15-21)**

John was challenging those who didn’t fully grasp the incarnation of Jesus Christ to truly give themselves to Jesus. While at the same time encouraging those who did believe but were having some doubts because of the false teaching.

*<sup>15</sup> If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. <sup>16</sup> And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. <sup>17</sup> In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. <sup>18</sup> 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.*

*<sup>19</sup> We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup> If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. <sup>21</sup> And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.*

Essentially John says

***Faith in God’s love for me gives me faith to love others for God (vv.15-16)***

He reminds all disciples if you believe in God and His Son for the forgiveness of your sins you have His presence by His Spirit dwelling in you. That is the cornerstone of faith. That God loves us and sent His only Son so that we would not perish but have everlasting life. This is the ‘selfless love’ of God John is referring to that we rely on. So John encourages us that if we rely on God’s love for salvation we seek to live it out in our lives. If you are seeking to love people selflessly, initiating reconciliation and seeking to meet people’s needs regardless of whether you are rewarded in return, that’s pretty good evidence that you are a believer. Why else would you do this?

Someone might argue here that they know some really good people who are very loving and kind. Yes there are. Why? Because all of us are made in God’s image and are already wired to understand what is right and wrong. So helping people, being kind, showing love, even forgiving others are things most people know they should do. But ask the unbeliever why he/she does and then the believer, you’ll get a totally different answer. The unbeliever will answer like ‘I know it’s the right thing to do’ or ‘it makes me feel good’ or ‘the world would be a better place if we did this.’ But they never tell us they do it out of love for God. We do it because God first loved us. How can we not do the same for others. How else are people going to come to know God? Plus

## ***We love out of grace not fear (vv.17-19)***

We don't love because we are afraid if we don't we won't make it to heaven. This is what John means here. Many people serve God because they are afraid He'll judge them if they don't. But they (and we) are already judged because we have a sin nature. We will suffer in eternal pain if we don't respond to the grace of God in salvation through Jesus. So we don't do it out of fear but out of love because of His grace towards us.

## ***Yet we love also out of obedience (vv.20-21)***

It's what we're supposed to do yet its not a burden, it's a delight. We obey God and Jesus' command to love others as He has loved us because He tells us but also because it results in our joy. It is rewarding in and of itself. That's why we don't need and don't want our acts of selfless love reciprocated.

*<sup>20</sup> If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. <sup>21</sup> And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.*

John was speaking to believers about those who claimed to believe God but didn't believe Jesus was God's Son. Therefore, they did not feel obligated to love others like God because they didn't believe that's the way God loves us, since they rejected God would willingly sacrifice His own son for to meet our need of forgiveness. If we don't understand the context of the letter we will look at v.20 and say 'Well I don't love like this. I'm hanging on to unforgiveness. Therefore according to v.20 I'm not a believer.'

That's not what John is talking about here. He's challenging those who reject Jesus as Lord yet claim to believe in God. Without faith in Jesus you don't believe in God. Therefore, your life won't reflect any change.

All of us who are believers are not perfect. We struggle to show this kind of love to others. We don't think about others the way we should. We're saved but we're just being disobedient at times. So then, here's two challenges this week:

To whom are you and I going to show agape love to? Perhaps the Spirit already brought someone to mind. Someone you need to forgive. Someone who has a great need. You are in a position to initiate healing and reconciliation. Or God has blessed you to bless someone else. Will you obey God's command to love a few people this week without expecting anything in return? Even knowing the other person may not forgive you, if that's what God is leading you to do. Or knowing the other person is not able to repay you with anything in return. You just want to encourage them and love them the way God does because you know that's what he wants you to do. And you can do it because His Spirit dwells in you.

The second challenge is this: if another believer blesses you this week through an act of loving kindness, do not ruin their desire to show you love by refusing what they do or by insisting you pay them back somehow. And we all do it. We need to accept God's love by grace just as Jesus freely accepted the washing of His feet with oil. Yes its humbling but think of the joy that we have when we give someone something just out of love. Don't robe them of that same joy.

These acts of love may result in reconciliation but they may not. These acts of love may only temporarily help someone out but at least its better than nothing. Yet, these acts of love bring glory to God because we show our faith is real and we witness to a world that doesn't believe in a God they can't see but they just might because they see in us the difference God makes in our life.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us  
at [olivt@rideau.net](mailto:olivt@rideau.net)