

On Mission Together: *Loving One Another Part 1*

1 John 4

I've shared this story before but when I was about 9 years old I remember a time when my dad had to go out for the evening and leave me home alone, which meant I had to cook my own dinner, in this case a frozen turkey TV dinner. I was actually pretty excited about this arrangement but when I went to cook my dinner I couldn't get the oven to heat up. The reason is because I thought you just turn the knob to the temp you want and it heats up. I didn't realize that you had to turn the other knob to "bake" or "broil". Looking back I can't imagine why I couldn't figure that out, but I didn't. So after waiting five or ten minutes and realizing the oven wasn't heating up and I couldn't figure out why (again, I wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer), I took the TV dinner out of the cold oven, peeled back the aluminum foil and began to eat it frozen. I would chip a little ice covered turkey off with a knife and then suck on it, hoping it would taste like turkey once the ice melted. It didn't. All the ingredients were there, but it tasted terrible because it was uncooked and ice cold.

Why do I tell you that story? Because a church without love is kinda like that frozen TV dinner – you can have all the right ingredients - right teaching, right practice, right evangelism, right worship, right ethics, right service – but if the church doesn't have the warmth of love it's not going to be anything like God intended it to be. The church won't taste the way God intended the church to taste.

We're in the second week of a series called *On Mission Together*. Just to briefly recap from last week, our focus isn't going to just be on *what* God has called us to do, but *who* He called us to do it with – each other. We are to be on mission, together. Our culture tends to think in individualistic terms, and that can have some benefits, but it also has a built in weakness – we miss the strength, care, and camaraderie that comes from community. The biblical culture viewed life much more through the lens of the community, rather than the individual. God has designed it such that we can bring Him more glory together than we ever could alone. God has called us as a community of faith to work together to accomplish His kingdom purposes.

So when we answer Jesus' call to follow him, we are enlisted in his mission and at the same time we're inescapably connected to one another. Relationship is intrinsically a big part of discipleship – you can't follow Jesus without being organically connected with your brothers and sisters who are also following Christ. And what I want us to see this morning is that a vital component of discipleship – in fact, I will say *the* most important component to discipleship is loving one another. If we get that right, we'll get the other stuff right. If we get that wrong, we'll get everything else wrong, even if we get it all technically right. And the church just won't "taste" right.

So what I want to do this morning is to make the case biblically that loving one another is the most important and defining characteristic of those who are disciples of Jesus, then next week we'll look at what it means to love and how we can grow in the love of Christ. This morning we're going to be looking at several passages, so get ready to turn some pages.

I. **Four extreme truths that demonstrate why love is so essential to Christian discipleship**

What I mean by "extreme" is that the NT language about loving one another goes beyond it just being important to Christian discipleship, to it being the make it or break it ingredient of Christian discipleship.

The NT language about loving one another is extreme because it seems to say that if you don't have love for one another you're not only not a disciple, you're not a Christian. That's extreme. But I believe we'll see this morning that it's true and I believe the NT language is purposefully extreme so that we *get it*. So that we don't think that loving one another is optional equipment to the Christian life. So let's consider four extreme truths about the vital connection between loving one another and being a Christian disciple.

a. Extreme truth #1: It is evidence that we have been born of God

[7] Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. [8] Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. 1 John 4:7-8

First of all, there's an amazing theological statement tucked into these verses: *God is love*. Not, "God has love" or "God is *loving*" – *God is love*. The quality of love is so intrinsically a part of God's character, that everything He does is perfectly guided by and motivated by love. Every other attribute of God, even His wrath against sin, is in perfect harmony with His love. God never does anything from anything other than a loving motive.

God is the source of all love – there is no love in all of creation that doesn't find its source in God. Paul asks the Corinthian church, *what do you have that you did not receive?* The answer is *nothing*, and that holds particularly true with love. Any love we might have didn't originate with us – we received it from God. We received the ability to love, the desire to love, even the knowledge of what love is, from God.

In this way, maybe more than any other way, human beings are like the moon and God is like the sun. We can't produce love (in the same way the way the moon can't produce light), but we can reflect God's love. God *radiates* love, we *reflect* love. God is love.

By the way, the very next verse in 1 John points us to the cross as God's love on most vivid display: *[9] In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. [10] In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

The essence of love, which we will talk more about next week, is to desire someone else's good, even at tremendous personal cost. God loved the world so much that He was willing to pay the ultimate cost in sending His Son in order to save it. John reminds us that the gospel doesn't begin with us loving God, it begins with God loving us and sending His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

But John extrapolates this truth that God is love, His essence of being, His DNA, is love and says very simply, if we're born of God (God's children) we'll love because we'll have God's DNA in us. If we don't, we're not. If there is no evidence of God's love in us, then we're not His children. That's extreme. But it's true. Now, that doesn't mean we are loving people perfectly – we need to grow (and we'll talk more about that next week) but the evidence of God's love in us must be present.

b. Extreme truth #2: The only commandment Jesus gave to us is to love one another as he loved us (Jn. 13:34)

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. (John 13:34 ESV)

This isn't the only thing that Jesus commands his disciples to obey, but it is, as far as I can see, the only *commandment* that Jesus gave them. This is of the highest priority to Jesus. It's a commandment that

reminds us of the OT command to *love your neighbor as yourself*, which Jesus said was the second greatest commandment. So why does Jesus call it new? John Piper makes two suggestions:

1. It's the first time that this type of love had been modeled for us. As John Piper writes: *Before Jesus, no one had ever been able to say without qualification, 'love as I have loved.'* So the commandment is to live out the love of Jesus.
2. But the commandment is also a command to live on the love of Jesus: *as I have loved you*. The power to obey this command comes from knowing how much Jesus loves us.

I began this message by saying that the church will be a cold and hard place if we get everything right but don't love one another. The church will also be a cold, hard place if we don't know and live on the love of Jesus for us. And not just us corporately, but us individually. He knows you by name. He has counted the hairs on your head. He died on the cross for you. And for me. Jesus' love for us is very personal and when we know his love, really know his love for me, his love for you, then the warmth of his love radiates from us and through us to those around us. *Love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*

Why is this extreme? Because Jesus highlighted this commandment like no other. Near the end of his earthly ministry, as he knew the cross was looming, he stopped everything and said to his disciples, *a new commandment I give to you*. This is the most important thing to get right if you are going to follow me. Jesus commands us to do many things, but he has only given us one new commandment: *love one another*.

c. Extreme truth #3: Loving one another is the most effective evangelistic strategy the church has

After giving the new commandment to love one another, Jesus goes on to say this, [35] *By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" John 13:35

One of the most accurate ways to verify someone's identity is a retina scan. The reason it's so accurate is that each human eyeball is unique and there's no way to forge a human retina. Loving one another is the equivalent of a retina scan. Jesus says that the world will be able to identify us as his followers by our love for one another. Because we are love one another with the love that Jesus loved us, we should stand out in the world, and that love is to be a beacon of light and hope to a dark and stormy world, pointing others to the safe harbor of Christ's love.

It doesn't always work that way. There can be so much division and squabbling in the Christian world that, honestly, we don't look much different than anyone else. Maybe we look more petty and uncharitable. I've met Christians that seem to have a chip on their shoulder: if you don't believe exactly as they do about some particular doctrine, they don't even pretend to like you or want anything to do with you. I've been in churches that weren't even friendly, much less loving. A church I attended many years ago was so focused on exciting spiritual experiences that at first I thought it was one of the most amazing churches ever. But over time I noticed that it was a very cold church. There was a lot of jockeying for position, but not a lot of plain old affection and love for one another. As I got to know people it seemed that the relationships were shallow and empty. I don't question the genuineness of the believers, but as disciples they weren't being taught the importance of loving one another.

Listen, Jesus didn't say, "by this all people will know that you are my disciples, by your exciting spiritual experiences" or "by your adherence to a particular doctrine" or "by your intolerance of anyone who doesn't look, think, or act like you". I'm not saying that spiritual experiences aren't important or that what we believe isn't important – we want to care about what we believe, and in particular that we are careful

to be as biblical as we can be in what we believe, so I'm not saying that it doesn't matter what we believe. But Jesus said the identifying marker – the retina scan to verify our identity as his disciples – is our love for one another. So when the church strategizes about evangelistic plans, we'd better include the priority of growing in our love for one another. That's what Jesus is saying.

d. Extreme truth #4: without love our spirituality is worthless (1 Cor. 13)

[1] If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. [2] And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. [3] If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3 ESV)

Paul mentions four extreme spiritual mountain peaks all in one composite person:

- has amazing spiritual gifts –fluent in the tongues of men and angels
- has deep spiritual knowledge – they can prophesy things to come, unpack mysteries that have stumped everyone for centuries, and just pretty much know everything.
- has mountain moving faith. Everywhere they go, miracles follow.
- Is heroically sacrificial – to the point of giving everything to the poor and surrendering their body to be burned at the stake.

This is someone that most of us would think rates highly on the spiritual maturity meter. This is someone who we would think has a fast track to God. But Paul wants to make it clear that without love, all these things mean nothing. His tongues are like clanging cymbals – noise and nothing more. His knowledge and understanding of mysteries and high octane faith is not enough to compensate for lack of love and add value to him or her. Their heroic sacrifice gains them nothing in God's eyes. Why? Like a cold oven, all these ingredients come out hard and cold and taste nothing like God intended them to when heated up with love.

Motive is so important in all we do. God cares as much about why we do something as He does about what we do. If our spirituality isn't motivated by love, then invariably it will be motivated by spiritual pride and selfishness. Love is what bends our spiritual activity towards the good of the person(s) we are ministering to. Without love, our sin nature will bend everything back inward on ourselves.

I happened upon a letter this week that illustrates the importance of motive. It is written by a young woman who is very much regretting that she ended her engagement with her fiancé and she's trying to make it right.

Dearest Jimmy,

No words could ever express the great unhappiness I've felt since breaking our engagement. Please say you'll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you! Yours forever, Marie.

P.S., And congratulations on winning the state lottery.

If our motive isn't love, Paul says, our spiritual exercises mean nothing – not matter how impressive they might seem. Love adds value to all we do. Lack of love makes worthless all we do. That's what Paul is saying. Its extreme, but its true. Without love, our spirituality is worthless.

GCC, we can get a lot wrong and still get it right if we are growing in the love of Christ, and conversely we can get a lot right and still be way off if we lack love. Following Jesus as disciples means we're willing to take the path of love, ready to grow in love, ready to repent and change when we're convicted of being unloving.

On Mission Together
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Next week we'll explore what the Bible says about what it means to love one another and how we can seek to grow in love. But let's close this morning by simply asking the Lord to help us, as followers of Christ, to get this right and grow in our love for one another.