

God is Love

Third Anniversary of New Covenant Bible Church

1 John 4:7-12

David Sunday

May 5, 2013

I've chosen for our third anniversary words from John, the Apostle of love. First John 4:7-12:

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. 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. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for this Word from You and pray You would deeply apply it to our hearts. Continue Your work of transformation in our lives as Your Spirit works through the preaching of Your Word to sanctify us as a church. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

God is love. These words are so sublime and sweet and yet so hard for believers to really believe. Martin Lloyd-Jones said, "The more I study the New Testament and live the Christian life, the more convinced I am that our fundamental difficulty—our fundamental lack—is the lack of seeing the love of God. It is not so much our knowledge that is defective, but our vision of the love of God." God is love not love is God. Love doesn't define Who God is, rather God defines what love is. God is love.

This is not all there is to believe about God. The Apostle John himself tells us, "*God is light, and in him is no darkness at all*" (1 John 1:5). In John 4:24 we read, "*God is Spirit.*" So we should not condense all God's attributes into one, as if God's love trumps all other dimensions of His being and personality. God is holy, just, true, omnipotent and many more things.

But because we are so prone to doubt and forgetfulness, we have the beautiful statement "*God is love*" stated twice in 1 John 4, first in verse eight and then in verse 16. Notice John does not say, "God loves us," or "God loves," or "God is loving." All of those statements are true but John wants to take us deeper to see more than that. "*God is love*" in His very essence. His nature is love. It is impossible to

think about God without love. God never stops being a God of love. Everything He is is consistent with His love and all His actions flow out of His character which is full of love. You could never say this about any human being. No one who knows me well would say, "David is love." I hope they would say, "David is growing to be a loving person." But they wouldn't ever say, "David is love." But God is love.

Theologians have seen glimpses of the Trinity in this truth. From eternity—without beginning or end—God is love. How can that be if God is a solitary individual? Love requires a Beloved on Whom to lavish that love. Behold the Triune God—a Community of Divine Love. God the Father loves God the Son from all eternity and the conveyor of this ineffable love is the Person of God the Holy Spirit. This is lofty doctrine, far beyond our comprehension. But there is enough evidence in John's Gospel to prompt our reverent contemplation of this theme: the love within the Godhead—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I want to take this doctrine in the same practical direction as the Apostle John does in 1 John 4:7-12. On this, our third anniversary as a church family, I want us to see that because God is love, we ought to love one another. That sounds simple but it is never to be taken for granted.

Think about this: What really makes a church a happy, joyful, blessed place? It's love. It's not a fine building, well-financed budget (as much as we are grateful for the provision God has made for our church), popular ministers or a large number of people coming in that makes a church happy. It is love that makes a church a place of joy and blessedness. It is when our hearts are attached to one another with mutual affections and we share our joys and sorrows together, when we weep with one another in sick rooms, hospitals and gravesides and rejoice with one another at baptisms and communion. It's the daily flow of that love, heartfelt sympathy, concern for others. It is knowing, "I belong to a body of people who care for my soul and will walk with me on this path of faith—knowing I love them and they love me." That is what makes a church happy and joyful. In the absence of that love, all the other blessings quickly grow stale and sour.

It is your love for one another as a church that makes the hearts of your elders rejoice. When I think about what God has done in our midst in these last three years—the love poured out in New Covenant Bible Church—it makes me a very glad, grateful pastor. It was a delicate operation for two churches to come together in marriage—to form a new church as we did three years ago. Were it not for the Spirit of Love—the Holy Spirit being poured out in our midst to sustain us in love, sweeten our affections for one another and keep us persevering in love toward one another—we quickly would have ruined everything. But God has been very gracious to us. He has generously poured out His love in our hearts, so much so that I rarely hear an unkind word, backbiting, gossip or critical spirits in this body of believers. That is God's doing—His work—and we praise Him for it. We celebrate that today.

But will it continue? That is the question. The world would say no. The world glares at the local church, expecting and waiting for her to divorce. Sadly, many professing Christians have very little faith

in the church of Jesus Christ. They think of the Bride of Christ as an unloving, unlovely spectacle. Far too many Christians today are cynical about the prospects of Christ's church. Idealistic notions have been met with disappointed expectations. Instead of persevering in love, too many Christians try to protect their wounded spirits by withdrawing from or protesting against the church. Yet I contend there is nowhere on earth today where God's love is more on display than in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, even with all her glaring faults and shameful failures.

If you want to see God's love in the world today, where do you go? You go to church—the body of Christ. In fact I dare to say I believe the church is the most loving organized group on the face of the earth today. Lest you think I've become delusional or buried my head in the sand, I will tell you I'm not saying that because I want to whip up some emotions about the church. No, I'm saying it because I believe this is what the Bible teaches. Where else can you go to find the love of God on display if not to the local church of Jesus Christ?

Please hear me out if your experience seems contrary to this statement. I believe we have strong reasons to be confident that the Spirit of love which has so filled our church these past years will continue to fill us more and more. We have reason to be confident—not complacent—because God's love in our midst is not something to be taken for granted or assumed to be automatic. It is to be cultivated, treasured, pursued, protected, nurtured and earnestly sought after in prayer. But it is a reality. The church of Jesus Christ is the humble dwelling place on earth of the God Who is love. So if there is anywhere you would expect to see God's love on display in the world today, it is in the church among the people of God.

First John 4:7 says, "*Beloved, let us love one another...*" I love how John speaks of them as 'beloved'—dearly loved. It's wonderful to have a pastor who—when he says to you, 'beloved' or 'dearly loved'—you believe him. You believe he means what he says and loves you because you are in Christ. You know it is coming from his heart.

That is the way John was. He was an old man when he wrote these letters. You can picture him overflowing with love for the flock of God. He loves them dearly. One of my great prayers is that I would be that kind of pastor for you—that I would die to self-assertion, self-pity, self-exaltation, self-protection, self-righteousness and whatever other form of selfishness there is in my heart keeping me from loving you the way God loves you. Because you are God's beloved—loved by God, bought by His Son Jesus—He loves His church.

Because we are beloved by God, we ought to love one another. In these sweet verses, John goes on to expound two of the most powerful impulses for love amongst Christians. Because of the power of these impulses, I am confident the church will be a community of love in this fallen world. It is not always so and there are many failures along the way. But ultimately—praise God for this—the love of Christians

for one another does not depend on Christians. Rather, it comes from God. God is committed to ensuring that His people will be a people who love one another. John makes that clear in these verses.

Let's consider these two realities and rejoice in how this God Who is Love ensures that we, His people, will be characterized by love for one another.

1. God's Life within Us (1 John 4:7-8)
2. God's Love for Us (1 John 4:9-12)

God's Life within Us

God's life within us ensures we will be a people filled with love. "*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God...*" John Piper says, "Love is from God, not the way letters are from a mailman, but the way heat is from fire or light is from the sun. Love belongs to God's nature. It is woven into Who He is. It is part of what it means to be God." Love comes from God. The only reason someone who is not a believer can show genuine love is because they are created in God's image. God shows a lot of common grace to all of humanity. But all human love will fall short. Without God's love invigorating us, our love will evaporate because love comes from Him.

Then God's Word says, "*Whoever loves has been born of God and knows God*" (verse seven). When we are born again by the Spirit of God—that miracle of regeneration—God's life comes into us. The life of God enters into the souls of men and women and the life of God is a life of love. So the ultimate test of our Christian faith is not how much doctrine we know but rather if what we know of God fills us with love—love for God and other people. It is impossible to be enlivened by God's life—to be born of God—and not to love because God is love.

Look at verse eight: "*Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.*" It is impossible to know God and not become a loving person. It's possible to get puffed up with knowledge of theology or know a lot about your Bible and not be a loving person. But it is not possible to know God and not be a loving person. God is love and when we share in fellowship and communion with Him, His love fans into flame the embers of our love. So because of the gift of regeneration—the Holy Spirit making dead sinners alive in Christ—and the life of God invading our souls and causing us to be born again, we now become a people who love. That's why I'm confident the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is the most loving group of people on the face of the earth. Where else would you find people who have been born of God? Where else would you find people in whom the love of God dwells if not in the church?

Realize what a desperately serious matter it is to call yourself a believer—a Christian—and yet be filled with hate, gossip, slander, backbiting and indifference. This is a contradiction of the most basic reality about being a Christian. To be a Christian is to be born of God. So to say that you are a Christian

without having love is to prove you are not a Christian. If we have no love for believers, we are pronouncing and proclaiming through our actions that we have no life of God within us. We cannot be born again if we know nothing of this love.

But John is stating reality: Believers do love one another because it is part of their new nature. So realize also what a serious matter it is to accuse the church of the Lord Jesus Christ of not being loving. To say the church has no love is to deny the basic reality of what God has done for His church. Maybe you have felt that way sometimes or have been in a church situation where you felt discouraged by the lack of love.

There was once a woman in Martyn Lloyd-Jones' church—the wonderful Westminster Chapel in London—who came to him discouraged and disheartened with her church. According to this woman, she went to Dr. Lloyd-Jones and told him, “We don't love one another in this church.” His response was bold and compassionate. The woman recounted, “Tenderly, he looked at me and said, ‘Don't say that. It is the devil that makes you say that.’” It is the devil that makes you say there is no love in this church.

For one thing, how can any of us have the knowledge or be in a position to accuse the whole church of having no love? For another, the only way the church could be devoid of love is if the church is devoid of born-again believers. Thabiti Anyabwile, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Grand Cayman and a Gospel Coalition blogger, writes:

“If we cannot see love among the people of God, either these are not the people of God or the god of this world has blinded us to the love of God at work among us. I am persuaded that most often it is the second cause—Satan's blinding influence. The enemy does not want us to see the love of God moving, renewing, strengthening and sustaining the people of God because He is a murderer and hater from the beginning. He does not want you to see God's love for you. Satan does not want you to understand the love God has for you, so he will blind you—sometimes through discouragement or self-pity—to the love that is right before your very eyes in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. He does not want us to know and rely upon the love God has for us, or to share that love with one another. He tempts us to say untrue and unbelieving things about Christ's church.”

Friends, wherever you find born-again believers, there you will find love. It will not be perfect or without plenty of room for growth and improvement, but it will be real love—God's love—because he is in us. So don't let Satan dupe you or make you a mouthpiece for the accuser. Believe that Christ's church is full of God's love because it is full of God, not because of who we are. He is in us. Pray that God would give you eyes to see His love in His people and the ability to share and celebrate His love with His people, because His people share His life. His life is a life of love.

God's Love for Us

God's put His love for us on display in Christ, specifically in the cross of our dear Savior. First John 4:9 says, "*In this the love of God was made manifest [shed abroad, made clear, revealed] among us.*" Friends, how has God revealed His love? How does He assure you of His love? How do you know that God is love?

John puts it so simply in the second part of verse nine: "*In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we [the community of believers] might live through him.*" God doesn't just say, "I love you." He not only loves in word but also in action and truth. We know He loves us because His Son laid down His life for us (1 John 3:16). He sent His Son in an action of self-sacrifice—giving up something for the benefit of others. The incarnation of God's Son—the birth of Jesus—is the visible proof of the invisible truth that God is love. If you want to know that God is love, look at the manger in Bethlehem. Look at the Gospel accounts of the life of our great Redeemer and at the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ which we remember at the Lord's table. "*God sent His only Son...*" His One and only Son Who was precious and loved with infinite intensity by His Father from all eternity. He sent His only Son into a world—a hostile environment—of rebels who had despised and spurned His love. He sent His Son on a rescue mission to pay the ransom to set us free from our slavery to sin and make us His dearly loved children forever.

This is love! It is not some sentimental notion we conjure up in our Hollywood-saturated minds. Rather, it is the gospel. "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life*" (John 3:16). "*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us...*" (1 John 4:10). According to one commentator, "There can be no explanation or definition of true love which does not start with God's love." You can't explain or define love unless you start with God. Don't start with man but with God and you will see love.

"*And sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins*" (1 John 4:10). The word 'propitiation' refers to the sacrifice of atonement—His work on the cross—cleansing us from our sins and satisfying, absorbing and turning away God's holy and just wrath toward sin. When you hear the word 'propitiation' think, "God's love sent God's Son to bear God's just wrath for the sins of God's chosen children." Jesus absorbed that wrath. First John 3:16 says He laid down His life for us to save us from the wrath of God. God sent His Son to save us from God's holy wrath.

Notice this was not God the Son twisting God the Father's arm, finally persuading Him to love us. No, this was God the Father Who loved us from all eternity and chose us from before the foundation of the world to be His dearly loved children. He designed the path whereby His holy wrath for our sins could be

satisfied so we could be adopted into His family and become the objects of His infinite, eternal, unchangeable love. As we sing:

My Jesus pure was crushed by God
By God in judgment just
The Father grieved, yet turned His rod
On Christ, made sin for us.

(From My Jesus Fair by Chris Anderson)

“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” (1 John 4:10). John says in verse 11, *“Beloved, if God so loved us [if this is how He loved us], we also ought to love one another.”* John Piper says, “We ought to love each other the way fish ought to swim in water and birds ought to fly in the air and living creatures ought to breathe and peaches ought to be sweet and lemons ought to be sour and hyenas ought to laugh. Born again people ought to love.” This is our new nature. It’s not who we were apart from Christ but it is who we are and what we’ve experienced in Christ. When we love one another, we are becoming who we really are in God. We are becoming the children He destined us to be, proving to be partakers of His life and showing we are indwelt by His Spirit. We are revealing to a world the visible glory of the invisible God Who is love.

Verse 12 says, *“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.”* Friends, if you want to find love in this world, where do you go? You go to the people who have experienced the deepest, most compelling love imaginable; to those who know, delight and believe that God sent His Son into the world to be the propitiation for their sins. You go to the people who are loved with an everlasting love, who are being so powerfully transformed by the love of God within themselves that they are living out God’s supernatural love with one other. You go to the church if you want to find love in this world, because no one on earth is loved like Christ’s church. We are loved with an everlasting love by the God Who is love. So let us love one another.

The Father opens wide His arms to all who have run to Christ for refuge from sin and trusted in Jesus to be the propitiation—the One Who turns away God’s just wrath for our sins. At the Lord’s table, we do not go through a mere ritual. We partake intangible signs and symbols of the eternal reality of God’s love in Christ. It is an awesome, holy and joyful moment for God’s people to take in their hands the bread of which Jesus said, *“This is my body...”* and to hold the cup and drink the fruit of the vine of which he said, *“This is my blood...”* (Luke 22:19-20). Partake of these emblems with faith and joy, not doubting or spurning, but believing that He loves you and is for you. If you do not believe or know these realities to be true yet, believe this: God will make them known to you if you come to Him in faith. He wants you to know and experience His love.

We would encourage you—if you are not a believer yet—to not take from this table but instead to come to Jesus. I'm going to lead us in prayer for all of God's people. You can join and call on the God Who is love.

Father, we thank You for Your eternal design to lavish Your love on sinners who do not deserve it. We believe that we are sinful in ourselves but You have loved us in Christ and You will love and keep us forever in His love when we put our trust in Jesus. So we come to Jesus as we come to this table. We feast on these emblems of His dying love with great thanksgiving and pray Your love would be poured out richly amongst us—that we would love one another with the very love with which You have loved us. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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