

Why Love?

1 John 4:13-21

If you've been with us for this series in the book of 1 John, your reaction to the passage I just read might be, "Really? **Another** passage about loving God and one another? What is it with John and love? Why does he keep circling back to loving God and loving one another?" That was my reaction when I started studying this passage. Here are a couple examples of what we've already read in 1 John:

16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

1 John 3:16 (ESV)

23 And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

1 John 3:23 (ESV)

Why was John so stuck on God's love and our love for him and others? If we broaden out our focus from the book of 1 John to the entire Bible, I think we have to conclude that we cannot overstate the importance of love. One of the core passages in the OT that every Jew would have known and recited daily is the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6 "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

When Jesus was asked what is "the greatest command" in the OT/Law, he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart. . . soul. . . and mind. . . And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul wrote that lovelessness nullifies your gifting, knowledge, faith, wisdom, and sacrifices. "If I don't have love, I am nothing."

John understood all of this and more because he had seen love personified in Jesus. So we shouldn't be surprised that he loops back to love for God and love for one another so many times in 1 John. The structure of the book of 1 John has been described as a spiral staircase that gets wider as it goes down. Each time he circles back to love he adds depth and nuance. I would encourage us all to approach this passage with humility and teachable hearts. [Prayer]

John talks about 1) the gospel and love, 2) God and love, and 3) the church and love. We'll notice a progression as we work our way through this passage.

The Gospel and Love. (1 John 4:13-15) In these verses John explains how believing the gospel will put you in the closest possible fellowship with God himself.

13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

This mutual abiding is one of the ways that John speaks about having eternal life.

As he did back in 3:24, John writes that the Spirit gives us the assurance that we have eternal life. Jesus had promised his disciples that he wouldn't leave them as orphans in this world. Rather, he would send them the very Spirit of God who would indwell them. The Father and the Son make their home within all who believe through the person of the Holy Spirit.

In verse 14 John speaks of his own firsthand experience with Jesus.

14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

This echoes what John said at the very first of this letter (see 1:1-2), namely that his message about Jesus wasn't rumor or hearsay; John and the other apostles were reporting what they had seen (and heard and touched). Their message was that God the Father had sent his unique Son to be the Savior of the world. Jesus hadn't merely come to save the Jewish people from their sin; he was sent to be "the Savior of the [entire] world." Last week we saw in 4:9-10 that "this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." It turns out that love doesn't merely mean being nice; it means dying for somebody who doesn't deserve it. Love involves sacrifice for the well-being of others.

The gospel is fundamentally good news about the love God has for us through Christ. Therefore, John makes this wide-ranging statement in verse 15:

15 **Whoever** confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.

Anybody who confesses (believes and declares) that Jesus is the Son of God experiences the closest possible association with God himself: "God abides in him, and he in God." God dwells/abides within you through His Spirit. And Paul often spoke of believers as those who are "in Christ" (Romans 8:1, 1 Cor. 1:30, Phil. 1:1, etc.).

One of the things that shocked the religious people in Jesus' day was how freely Jesus offered this type of relationship with people. The prevailing attitude in that day (and in ours many times) was that God was mainly interested in righteous people - people who behaved themselves and had their lives together. But Jesus hung out with misfits and outcasts. The Pharisees asked why had he had table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners. Here's Jesus' response (Mark 2:17):

17 And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

If you don't think you're sinful you don't need a Savior. But if you do acknowledge that you're sinful and believe that God loved you so much that he sent His Son as your Savior, God welcomes you with open arms. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God has the closest possible association with the Father, Son, and Spirit.

The gospel is fundamentally good news about the love God has for us.

God and Love. (1 John 4:16-18) In verse 16 John first speaks of his own experience with the love of God; he then speaks of the experience everyone can have with the love of God.

16 So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

God's love wasn't merely an abstract idea for them; God's love was an experiential reality. They had come to know and believe the love that God had for them because they had come to know and believe Jesus. The love of God became visible when Jesus came in the flesh and died for their sins.

Next John says, "God is love." At the essence of his being, God is love. From eternity past God has existed in a loving unity of three equally divine persons. God didn't become loving when he created humanity; God is and has always been love. Since God is love, "whoever abides in love abides in God and God abides in him." To "abide/remain in love" is to keep the love of God front and center in our lives; we seek to understand and experience it in deeper ways. In John 15:10 Jesus commanded his disciples, "Abide in my love." In other words, the love of God isn't something you check off a list (you never say, "got it. . . God loves me. . . pass the potatoes"). Keep learning about and experiencing God's love. If you abide in love, John says, you "abide in God, and God abides in you" (because God and his love cannot be separated). Practically, what might it look like to abide in God and his love?

On Wednesday (Lord willing), I am going to fly to New Orleans where my brother will pick me up and drive me to our hometown of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. There I will spend a week with my mom/Nana (whom I haven't seen for two years). My plan is simply to **abide with her**. I'm not going to drop in, say hi, and leave; I'm going to abide with her. I will stay in her home and have unhurried time with her. We'll eat meals together, walk around the yard, sit at the kitchen table and ask each other questions, rehearse stories and events like we have for decades, etc. Mom has a few projects for me to do, but I'll mostly abide with her.

I've noticed that when you abide with somebody, for better or worse you often become like them. I've already warned my kids that I'm becoming Nana. Maybe you've seen that commercial about "how to not become your parents"; it's a little late for me.

No analogy is perfect. But if you abide with God, you don't just check in with him every once in a while; rather, you stay close to him and enjoy unhurried time. You sit and talk and listen to each other. The foundational way we listen to God is through the Scriptures. If you care to notice you will see the extravagant love of God in both testaments. When Philip Yancey wrote his book "Disappointment with God" (which is an issue for many people), he pointed out that if you read the Old Testament with fresh eyes, you notice that God was the one who was disappointed; God is the one with tears streaming down his face because his people would not return his love. He was the

faithful spouse and they were the one who wouldn't quit cheating on him (e.g. Hosea). In the OT God is slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and truth. Never quit learning about the love of God in the OT.

The New Testament, of course, stresses that we learn about the love of God by fixing our eyes on Jesus, noticing what he endured for us. The life of Christ is the most epic, heroic adventure imaginable. God took on flesh and blood and died for his enemies. If you abide in the love of God in Christ you will be drawn into the drama of Scripture, and the love commands will no longer seem unreasonable and undoable. Paul was someone who made it a habit of abiding in God's love. He never got over the love of God; to his dying day he was amazed that Jesus came to save sinners like him (see 1 Timothy 1). Not surprisingly, he loved others the God had loved him - sacrificially and wholeheartedly. At the end of his life he was glad he was being poured out as a drink offering to God (2 Timothy 4).

In verse 17 John makes a connection that he's already made several times in 1 John, namely that when we experience God's love deeply, we naturally love others deeply.

17 By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world.

The love of God doesn't change; God's love for us is constant. What changes and becomes "perfected" is our experience of God's love. When we abide in God's love, that love is given its fullest expression.

A consequence of this love being manifested so fully is "that we may have confidence for the day of judgment." Both the Old and New Testaments speak of a future day of judgment when we will be accountable for what we've done in this life. In the New Testament we're told that the day of judgment will be at the return of Christ. John says that when we experience God's love deeply we have confidence, ". . . because as he is so also are we in this world." When we love people the way God loves people, we prove that we are his children and have nothing to fear on the day of judgment. In verse 18 John writes:

18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

When John writes "there is no fear in love," he isn't talking about "the fear of the Lord" that is mentioned throughout Scripture. John wasn't ignorant of the rich tradition in Hebrew wisdom literature (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes) that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The fear John has in mind is the fear of punishment. The love John has in mind is the perfect love that God has for everyone who will receive it through faith in Christ. When the love of God goes from being an idea to being something we experience day by day, fear of punishment is banished. We know that we know God. We know that "there is therefore now no condemnation for [us because we] are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

The Church and Love. (1 John 4:19-21) In these verses John returns (once again) to the love command, showing the connection with the love of God he's been discussing. In verse 19 he points out:

19 We love because he first loved us.

You don't have to be a follower of Christ to be compassionate and kind and loving and honest, etc. But if you are a believer, John points out that the reason we love the way we do is because of the way Jesus has first loved us. We have a very distinct motivation and grid for love because Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you." As we abide in Jesus' love, we think less about how people deserve to be treated and we ask, "How can I love them like Christ does?" (Not always an easy question to answer, but we do ask it.)

In verse 20 John confronts the person who claims to love God but hates other believers. Obviously none of us loves others perfectly, so don't freak out if there are other believers you find hard to love. Here's what John writes:

20 If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

Not that we go around bragging about how much we love God, but all followers of Christ should be able to say, "I love God." As we discussed earlier, loving God is at the heart of biblical faith. Here John is "arguing from the lesser to the greater" (an *a fortiori* statement). His point is that it's easier to love someone standing in front of you whom you can see than to love God whom you cannot see (back in verse 12 John mentioned that "no one has seen God at any time").

The point is that if indeed "God is love," those who claim to love him should represent him accurately. It's as if God is saying, "Don't go around giving people the wrong impression of who I am and how I treat people."

21 And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

As we've seen throughout this passage, John isn't laying down some unreasonable demands. He's simply saying that those who have the closest association with God become like him and therefore love fellow believers as he does.

My encouragement to you is to abide in God and his love and see how it changes your heart toward yourself and toward others.