

True Love Sends
1 John 4:7–14
July 2, 2017

Love gets a lot of press. It seems to have about as many definitions as there are people in the world. How I understand love may vary quite a bit from how a neighbor understands it. So when I begin to discuss love I must not presume that everyone has the same thing in mind anymore than if I mention barbeque while visiting in Texas or Kansas or California, it conveys the same texture, aroma, and taste that a Memphian has in mind.

John once again takes up the subject of love. In a sense, he circles back several times to various facets of love. He does so by starting off this paragraph with a premise—and what a loaded premise! *Love is evidence of the new birth and the ongoing knowledge of God.* So he doesn't hesitate to tell us to continue loving one another. He knows that such love is natural and normal for those that God has birthed into His family.

Yet the kind of love that he's talking about is not sentimental or squishy or merely an attitude or a warm feeling. He ties love to its divine roots. So it's a holy love. If it's real love then it has to be from God and will bear evidence of His indwelling life.

But admittedly, that's far from how a lot of people perceive Christianity. Some consider Christianity a religion of hate because we call breaches of God's law *sin*. They even call us hypocrites because we refuse to countenance immoral and unethical behavior. They say that we really don't love or else we would approve of any kind of behavior that a person desires to practice.

John, though, has already declared that if we love the world the love of the Father is not in us (2:15). Why is that? True love and holy living never oppose each other but manifest the love of God. And yet this love is not rigid, inflexible, and even harsh. It flows from the wounds of Christ, so it acts selflessly toward others for their good.

Notice that in 3:23, John declared the way of assurance: “we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another.” He goes on to explain in 4:1–6 what it means to believe in the name of God's Son Jesus Christ. We listen to the apostolic gospel and confess Jesus Christ as having come in the flesh to redeem us from sin at the cross. Now he moves in 4:7–5:4 to an explanation of what he means by loving one another. We're not left to fill in the blank on what John means by love. Its basis originates from the nature of God, the manifestation of God sending His Son, and the effects of this love through Christ. *That kind of love now marks us as those born of God and knowing God.* How can John be so dogmatic that the one who does not love does not know God? Let's give that some thought as we consider this text.

1. The premise

John can exhort the church, “**Let us love one another,**” because “**everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.**” We understand that Jesus gave us clarity in John 3 that if we're to enter the kingdom of God we must be born from above. There must be the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit entering into those dead in trespasses and sins, and raising us to life, invigorating and illumining our minds to hear and believe the gospel of Christ. So through the Spirit and the Word we're brought to life in Christ. Consequently, we know God, i.e. we enter into a living, ongoing, experiential, and lively

relationship to Him. We don't just know about Him—we *know Him* in the intimacy of relationship.

So what is as natural as rain being wet and snow being cold is that those born of God and knowing God (present tense) love one another. It's not that love produces new birth and knowledge of God. Rather, as he's already argued, love for one another is an *evidence* not a basis for relationship to God (2:7–11; 3:9–18). So we don't love to be rewarded with eternal life—otherwise Jesus would not have gone to the cross. Instead, He went to the cross so that we might be united to God as forgiven people, and in that union, we might love one another as a clear reflection of His love. But that needs explanation.

2. The explanation

(1) *The nature of love.* John wants us to understand that love is not a feeling; it's action toward us that originates in the nature of God. **“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God.”** So its origin is in Him. If we attempt to understand love apart from the divine origin then our understanding fails. That's why we consistently hear the world talking about love but failing to grasp what it really is. It is not known apart from Him.

Then John looks at it negatively. **“The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.”** He doesn't say ‘Love is God,’ for that would make God impersonal, abstract, and merely a sentimental concept. Similarly, John said earlier, “God is Light,” referring to the holiness of God in His being and in all that He does (1:5). But he doesn't say, ‘Light is God,’ for that, again, would make God some kind of impersonal concept. Instead, both Light and love express the action of God. J. I. Packer explained it like this. “To say ‘God *is* light’ is to imply that God's holiness finds expression in everything that he says and does. Similarly, the statement ‘God *is* love’ means that his love finds expression in everything that he says and does” [*Knowing God*, 122].

This God pursues a people for Himself in love and holiness. In holy love, He sends His Son to rescue rebels to make them His children. In holy love, He sends His Son to the cross in order to remove the guilt and judgment against rebels whom He calls His children. So the natural response of those who've been rescued by this holy love is to show the same kind of selfless love to one another.

(2) *The manifestation of love.* If we're to love one another as the normal pattern of relationships for those born of God, then how do we know what this love looks like? John's explanation strips away the sentimental versions of love. *Love is holy, benevolent, selfless, costly, sacrificial action even to the unloving.* We see this in the three-fold use in this text of God *sending* His Son.

(a) In verse 9, John writes, **“By this the love of God was manifested in us [or among us, i.e. in the body of Christ], that God has sent His only begotten [or one-and-only, showing Christ's uniqueness] Son into the world so that we might live through Him.”** Love's manifestation is not found at Woodstock or waving a rainbow flag in a march or rescuing an animal from a shelter—all concepts of worldly love. We must not cheapen love! Love is made known by God sending His unique, one-and-only Son into the world. That's redemption language. God didn't send the Son to just show us how to live. He sent Him to deliver us from sin and spiritual death, **“so that we might live through Him.”**

God sent the pure, holy, and sinless eternal Son of God into the fallen world, filled with rebels and anarchists and God-haters, so that He might rescue as many as He purposed before the foundation of the world through His bloody death at the cross. That's love. Sentimental? No but selfless, benevolent, costly sacrificial action aimed toward the undeserving and even toward enemies of God. So the call to love one another in the body of Christ with selfless, benevolent action toward others united with us in Christ, while not even close to comparison, still gives something of that kind of manifestation of love.

Notice that God sent His Son **“so that we might live through Him.”** In other words, love has intentional purpose. It's not just tossed out like the attempt to throw spaghetti against a wall (don't try that in mama's kitchen). It's focused love. Without what Jesus has done in His death and resurrection, without His abiding life, we do not live. That's why John puts it so tersely in the last chapter: “He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (5:12). We live through Him. Without Christ we muddle through human existence trying to make money, become liked, satisfy desires, build a reputation, make ourselves happy, but we do not live. We're the walking dead without Him. God sent Jesus so that in union with Him we would experience life in all its fullness and abundance.

(b) In verse 10 he takes it further. **“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”** So He's not counting on love originating from us initiating it by how much we love God. It's interesting the verb tense for **“we loved God.”** He uses a tense to describe a settled and continuing sort of love toward God. So that would be an admirable kind of love. Yet even with that sort of love, we're not the definition or explanation of love. It's found in God sending Jesus to become something for us which John calls **“the propitiation for our sins.”**

We've already encountered that term in 1 John 2:2. *Propitiation* means a God-satisfying sacrifice of atonement. Who has to be satisfied? God does since He's the One that has been offended by our sin. The rebellion of humanity against the Law of God demands satisfaction. God who is Light cannot allow the darkness of sin and rebellion to go unchecked and unjudged in His universe. Sin must be judged which means *sinner* must face the consequence of rebellion against God. But here we attempt to fathom the fathomless depths of God's love. God sent His Son to become the very means of satisfying eternal justice against us. He became **“the propitiation for our sins.”** In other words, what was done in microcosm pointing ahead to the Messiah with bulls and goats sacrificially slain to atone for Israel's sins, Jesus as the sinless Son of God did with finality. He satisfied God in every respect on our behalf. He covered our sin forever in His bloody, sin-bearing death.

Now John tells us, **“In this is love.”** Do you want to understand what love means? Then see the Son sent to the cross for your sins. There you see love. And there you understand that love is not a nice sentiment that God had for us but His selfless action through Jesus at the cross. So when John explains love, he doesn't mean that we stand at a distance and say, ‘Well, I just love everyone!’ while we do absolutely nothing to serve anyone. Love takes selfless, sacrificial, costly, self-denying action. It's *manifested* in God's action in sending His Son.

(c) In verse 14 he shows the expansive nature of this love. **“We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.”** Here's no narrow

tribal deity doing a gallant act for faithful devotees. Rather here is the Creator who has been spurned by humanity, rebelled against, hated for His Law, despised for His commands, and unconcerned with His holiness, and yet this Creator sent His Son to gather former rebels and anarchists among every tribe, tongue, people, and nation into His bosom as His children. And at what cost did He do so? His Son became the Savior or Deliverer or Rescuer through bearing God's judgment due to us for our sins at the cross.

We're fine with Jesus being *our* Savior, and Savior for people like us. We have no problem believing that. But what of those not like us? Everyday I receive in my inbox from the *Joshua Project*, information on an unreached people group in some place around the globe. The email gives a little information about the group, like the one Wednesday in China near Burma where the women blacken their teeth and lips with betel juice as a sign of beauty. They staunchly follow Theravada Buddhism. And like the Kerinci people, one of the 224 different Indonesian unreached people groups, that are loosely Muslim while primarily practicing animism, living in a world of ghosts. Or they could be like the 430 or so unreached people groups in Central Asia that we pray for week-by-week in our services that primarily follow Islam and reject God sending His Son as Savior of the world. People that we don't know, who seem strange to us, who behave in objectionable ways, and who radically, sometime violently, oppose the God of Holy Scripture, God sent His Son to be their Savior. That's love. That's how we understand it. We see this God pursuing people who think absolutely nothing about Him and who reject the revelation concerning Him and His Son, having provided for their redemption through the death and resurrection of His Son.

For that reason we send our prayers, resources, and people into the world to declare what this God of love has done in sending His Son as the Savior of the world. As we grow in that passionate action we grow and experience a bit more of His infinite love.

We not only look outside of us, but this love compels us to love one another with that same kind of sacrificial, selfless, intentional, need-meeting holy love. Such love gives testimony to the God who saves us through the death and resurrection of His Son.

3. The necessity

Now John brings his premise—that love is evidence of new birth and knowing God—into the sphere of real life. **“Beloved, if God so loved us,”** referring to the nature of love in God's being, the manifestation of His love in sending Jesus on our behalf, and the effects of this love so that we might live through Him, **“we also ought to love one another.”** The word **“ought”** implies a moral necessity. It's something that we cannot treat as an *option* and still call ourselves followers of Jesus. That's why the recent SBC resolution condemning “alt-right”—white supremacy is a theological no-brainer. It cannot coexist in the Christian orb. Love goes with relationship to Christ. If we've come to know Christ, then there's the necessity of loving one another. God has lashed us to His love through Christ. We cannot abandon love if we're in union with Him.

Do we sometimes fail at loving one another? Do we sometimes struggle with a poor attitude toward another in the body? Do we sometimes turn our head the other way when we should be serving others in the body? Yes, that happens, which is why John does two things. (1) He shows us the directly outflowing nature of love because we're in Christ. It's now woven into the fabric of our life and thought as followers of Christ. (2) But He also exhorts us to continue in that love, demonstrating that we do not love robotically but

intentionally—just as He did with the intentional act of sending His Son. So there’s no *let go and let love* spirit but rather the call to pursue loving others because we now live through Christ.

Just about the time that we think we have this *love-thing* down-pat, the Lord brings someone into our lives that tests our love. I remember so vividly two guys in college that annoyed me. I’m not even sure why they annoyed me but they did. I’d find myself struggling with a poor attitude toward them. I even wanted to avoid them so that I didn’t have to interact with them. But wouldn’t you know it? A large group of us went on a retreat to learn more about walking with God, and who got *randomly* assigned as my roommates? You guessed it. I spent several days with those guys in close quarters so that I might see my own sinful heart, repent of it, and learn to love them.

Sometimes the Lord does that to us so that we learn that with our weaknesses and struggles with pride and selfishness, the call to love demands more than a bit of effort. It calls for dependence upon His Spirit. So John writes, **“By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.”** That reiterates what he’s already written in 1 John 3:24, where he identified the way of assurance through believing in Jesus and loving one another. We cannot do that apart from abiding in Him. And we know that we abide in Him and He in us **“because He has given us of His Spirit.”**

In our Wednesday Theological Reading group, we’re working through Carl Trueman’s *Grace Alone* where he quotes Augustine’s simple but profoundly stated understanding of what it means to live in the grace of God. “Give what Thou commandest, and command what Thou willest” [72]. That was a pretty good piggyback on what John declared. How do we love one another, especially when some people annoy us or maybe are too loud or maybe they whine or maybe they act ungrateful? How do we love selflessly as Jesus did? *God has given us of His Spirit.* His life in us enables us to love even in difficult settings. And in that love we’re marked by assurance that we belong to Him.

And so corporately, it has this effect upon us as we settle into lives of loving one another as the outflow of experiencing God’s love in Christ: **“We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.”** John has already testified as an apostle to this sending of the Son as Savior (1:1–3) but now he broadens the **“we”** to include the church’s confession. Those in whom the Spirit dwells, abiding in Christ, loving one another do so because they rest in the love of God manifest in His sending the Son as Savior of the world [I. H. Marshall, NICNT: *The Epistles of John*, 219–220].

It’s full circle, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones pointed out in his study on this passage. **“No one has seen God at any time,”** is reminiscent of John’s introduction to Jesus as the Word made flesh (John 1:18). But in his Gospel John goes on to state that Jesus has explained God. Now he uses the same phrase with yet another implication. **“No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected [completed] in us.”** How does God continue to manifest Himself to the world? He’s obviously done this ultimately through sending His Son as Savior of the world. But He continues to give the world slight glimpses of Himself through those in whom He abides. In this sense, God’s love comes full circle. He sent the Son out of love to rescue us from sin and bring us into relationship with Him. Now, indwelling us, He loves

through us even those hard to love. That kind of love sends glory back to Him because it originated in Him and His love. Here's where Lloyd-Jones helps us:

If I find myself loving a person who is not lovable, if I find myself ever praying for someone who has been persecuting me and has been dealing with me despitefully, if I find myself helping someone who has done his or her best to harm me, if I find myself doing that, I know that God is love and that He is within me, because if He were not in me I would never do it. I do not want to do this by nature; so if I love the brethren, I have a certainty that God is love [*The Love of God*, 87].

Such love bears evidence that we're born of God and know Him. Does that evidence mark your life?