



1 John 4:12-21
Perfecting God's Love

We have come here this morning to worship God – to have our eyes and our thoughts lifted up, to be released from the cares and concerns of this life and to pause, to think for a moment, about heavenly things. And so, you might be surprised to learn that as we do, God says, “Great, now that I have your attention, look back down at the people around you, because if you want to understand more about Me and My love, you’re going to need each other.”

It all begins here in 1 John Chapter 4 with a rather interesting statement:

1 John 4:12 No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.

For as much as we want to know God, and know about Him, the Bible tells us no one has ever seen Him. He has made Himself known in many ways – people have seen His glory or the Angel of the Lord has appeared as His messenger but no one has ever seen Him face to face.

The Ten Commandments even forbid us from making any images of Him. After all, the Bible tells us He is spirit (John 4:24) and invisible (1 Tim 1:17; 6:16) He told Moses no one can see Him and live (Ex 33:20).

How could you? How could your eyes process and your mind comprehend such holiness? How could you take it all in and understand? The idea of a deer in headlights comes to mind.

And yet though we can't see Him, God has gone out of His way to make sure we have both knowledge and experience of Him.

Creation testifies to Him. No one ever looks around the universe and says, “Well, this is a shoddy piece of work.” A few people try to explain it away, telling us it just banged into existence, spontaneously, with no purpose or direction, but throughout human history and across all cultures, humanity has had a sense that we were just squatting on somebody else's project.

Nature doesn't provoke us to say, “Wow, look what time and chance did!” No, it invokes a sense of awe about something greater, something that we struggle to understand, but something we know must be 'out there' and responsible for all of this.

And at various times and in various places, the God who is responsible for it all has done things to make Himself more clearly known and understood. He appeared to Moses in a

burning bush, and to the Israelites in a thundering cloud and pillar of fire. Later, He gave them the tabernacle and the Temple as beautiful places to come and meet with Him.

These were holy places full of beauty. The tabernacle was something like a tent, a portable sanctuary, but it was covered in cloth that was embroidered with incredible skill and detail and supported by a frame that was created out wood covered by precious metals. The Temple, which was a more permanent structure was made out of white stone and stood on a prominent hill. They were both places that people looked forward to visiting and places that invoked a sense of awe in the visitors.

And then eventually, God sent His son Jesus Christ, who said, [“He who has seen Me has seen the Father...I am in the Father and the Father in Me \(John 14:9\).”](#) One of the reasons Jesus came to earth was to help us understand more about God and to teach us plainly. And yet, even those who knew Jesus best, those who were closest to Him, did not fully understand all there is to know about God and His nature.

In fact, they couldn't, because there was more to be revealed, there was more that God was doing, and it involves you and me today.

As we read in

[1 John 4:12 No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.](#)

After all these other things have been done, after people have been stunned by the beauty of Creation and nature, after they've been wowed by the cloud and inspired by the fire, after they've been awed by the beauty of the tapestries in the tabernacle and inspired by the grandeur of the Temple, after they've been amazed by Jesus and His teachings and miracles, now comes a rather shocking surprise: today people are supposed to learn about God by seeing us. You and me. The City Gates Church. When they see us love one another, they're supposed to see the perfected love of God.

If you look up God's love on Google and search for images – this, us, is what people should see. That's a little overwhelming isn't it? Do you have 'perfect the love of God' anywhere on your to-do list today?

But it's true. [If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.](#)

God's love is perfected in us when we love others. The word 'perfected' means to finish something, to carry it through completely, bring it to an end or accomplish it. A few weeks ago we observed that God is love, and that love proceeds out of Him – ek tou theo – do you remember that? And then, we said that Christians have been born again – ek tou theo – we also proceed forth from God, we have been birthed out. And that birth has a purpose: that we would show the love of God, that we would be extensions and outlets of His love in the lives of people around us.

When we do that, when we let God's love flow through us to someone else, it is the perfection of God's love. Friends, what this says is so shocking, so unexpected, that I have to go back and review it again, but there it is: **If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.**

God's love is proclaimed to us in the Bible, proven to us on the cross, and now it is perfected in the believer as we show it to others.

This unseen God, who was present in the burning bush, in the cloud, once revealed in Jesus Christ, is now revealed in us! WE get to represent God. Forget about your favorite sports team – you can buy a jersey anywhere – there's nothing special about that, but there's something shocking and unbelievable about this: you get to represent God!

Loving others completes the circuit of God's love. It flows out of Him into you, then into another who then worships Him in response. And then it flows backwards too – out of Him into the other person who worships God by serving you, which you give thanks for to God.

It's like a holy Beltway with traffic in both directions but everyone has an E-Z pass and there's actually no tolls or traffic jams, everything's just zipping along blissfully around and around the city and people are stuck on the Metro with escalator outages and track repairs and they look out longingly at all those people happily circling around in reciprocal love... OK, maybe that's taking it too far, but you get the idea – love flowing out of God through you, into another, and then back to God – it's the perfection, the completion of God's love.

That means something VERY important! It means that your 'faith,' your 'religion,' your spiritual experience is about much, much, more than just you and God. If all you are here for this morning is goose bumps and inspirational thoughts, you're not experiencing God's perfect love because that doesn't happen until you actually let love flow through you.

But men, can I have your attention here. I want you to know I almost hate using this word 'love' because we've so misunderstood it in our culture. When the Bible says we're to love others, it doesn't mean we're supposed to write love songs or poetry about them. It doesn't mean we're supposed to be an emotional mess over them. That's romance or infatuation, and it has its place, but it's not what the Bible means by love. That's not how God loves us.

There is an emotional attachment, to be sure, after all, God gave us our emotions, but Biblical love, God's love, is first and foremost a love of action – action that is oriented toward others. So don't write this off as a bunch of touchy feely stuff. You could touchy and feely the love of Christ on the cross, but it's a whole different kind of experience, yet, "Greater love has no man than this, that He would lay down His life for a friend." Real love, biblical love, is hard and it involves sacrifice and effort more than poetry and flowers. So men, don't write this off because you keep hearing the word 'love.'

And there's something else we all need to know, that is that God has done an awful lot to prepare us for our role in perfecting His love. John wants to remind us that we're not doing all of this on our own:

13 By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.

God has sent His Holy Spirit to us, to awaken us, to help us to see our need for God, to bring us conviction of sin, to help us see our own need for righteousness. We don't just know all that on our own, God is at work through His Spirit teaching us.

Then, once we receive Christ, the Spirit comes to dwell inside of us and He begins to give us Godly desires, stirrings, ideas of good things we can do for people and ways to begin to clean up our lives. And not only does He give us the ideas and the inspirations, not only does He give us the conviction, He also gives us the strength. He dwells in us, He abides in us, He makes us better and enables us to serve. When we love other people, what we're really doing is letting Him flow through us – that's how the circuit is completed.

And of course, all of this is possible because of what the Son has done:

14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world. 15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 16 And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.

We have to keep coming back to this because it is so foreign to everyday experience. We know love because God came and did something great for us. We didn't earn it, He didn't do it because of anything we could or would do in response for Him, He did it because He is good, He is holy, and He knew there was no way we could ever do it for ourselves.

Think about your own experience. Isn't that the kind of gift you feel best about giving? Isn't that why people make a contribution to the Red Cross or some other group after a disaster? They want to do something to help someone who can't help themselves.

Parents or grandparents love the idea of giving a child a gift that they really want but can't buy for themselves. Or some of you get involved in community service reading to kids whose parents aren't home, or helping them with homework. It can take on many faces, but the heart is still the same – I want to do something to help. That heart is an echo of God and what He has done for us.

And when we experience that love, when we receive what He has done for us, we enter into a relationship with Him and suddenly He begins to abide, or dwell in us, and we in Him. And being together begins to change us, just like a good tutor begins to change their student, and eventually God begins to send us out on missions as His ambassadors – His representatives. He says, "You know what I would do, now go and do that for that person over there."

But we're never alone in doing it – He abides in us, His Spirit resides in us – really what He's saying is, go put yourself next to that person and let Me flow through you into them.

Friends, we've said it many times lately, but it's important to say it again – if you have a problem with God's love coming out of you, there's probably a problem with God's love coming into you. We're just a conduit, a pipe with an intake and an outlet. God wants stuff to come out of you, but it's just the stuff that He's pouring into you. You're a distribution warehouse not a manufacturing plant.

And when all of this comes together the right way, there are incredible benefits for you.

17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.

Each Christmas one of the things that has to be done is you get out the lights. You open up that tub, and it doesn't seem to matter how much effort you put into coiling them and storing them nicely, just by design I think, they're made to test your holiday cheer. But you go through the process and you try to get them all unraveled, and then what do you have to do? You have to test them. Before you get them on the tree or hang them from the house, you want to test them.

So, you plug them into an outlet and you see if electrons are going to flow properly along the little copper wires, down the cord, up into the bulb, across the filament, produce light and heat energy, and then continue along their merry way down the next stretch of copper wire to the next light, and on and on down the strip. And if everything works, you rejoice! It's on to the next step.

Well, when you have been plugged into God, when you have begun to understand His love for you, you have responded to Christ and His claims, and the Holy Spirit has moved into your life, flowing like electrons in a wire, you begin to show God's love and light to others, and suddenly you can see – it's working! There's proof that's visible outside of you, of what is going on inside of you.

Love for others is a source of proof in your life that all this is real and that it's functioning. And as a result, you have something to point to. You don't have to worry about the day of judgment, there is one coming, but you know don't worry about that, because you know God and there's proof – you know He has come into you and you know He is flowing out of you as well.

But let's back up and talk about things for a minute. Do you have a fear of God? Do you have a fear of judgment? Are you tormented spiritually? Why is that?

I would venture to say it's likely the result of some area in your life that you're not proud of. An area you're ashamed of. An area that you're afraid of God knowing about or other people finding out about. What's the answer to that? Simple: let more of God in.

There's nothing else as cleansing and therapeutic as God. There's no problem He can't solve, no situation He can't get you through, no sin He can't forgive except your own resistance. If you will open up and let Him in, He will come in and join you, He will work on your behalf.

I'm not promising it will be easy, He might be the large animal dentist and you're the elephant with the infected tusk – he might have to rip that thing out with a saw, a hammer and chisel and a come-along winch – but He will. He'll do it. You can be afraid of the pain but don't be afraid of Him.

And understand that there's going to be pain one way or the other. If you're already dealing with fear, torment, anxiety, shame, depression, stress, why would you keep going that way?

Can we read this together again?

17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.

If you're afraid, or if you're not excelling in love - open up the intake – let more of God in, let Him in through worship music in your car or on your phone, in your cubicle or headset, let Him in through times of prayer, and Scripture memorization and Scripture reading. Let Him in by making a priority of fellowship and getting out to some Bible studies. Let Him in by loving others – that's the whole point of the passage, isn't it? Isn't that how we're told His love is perfected?

Look around for an opportunity to show love and serve. Remember, we're The City Gates Church – we come in worship and go out to serve, to love. This is both a place of rest and a training ground for spiritual warfare.

The love you show is going to be sacrificial; at times it will be inconvenient to your flesh. That's what Biblical love is. If the greatest example of love is the death of Christ on the cross, what does that say about us and our petty little desire for some control and ease and how much we hate to be inconvenienced?

But before you can fall into a self-serving little pity party and say how messed up you are or are how far you have to go, let me remind you how all of this started:

19 We love Him because He first loved us.

There's a world of comfort and inspiration in that little verse. If you're looking for a pithy little mission statement for your marriage, here's a perfect one to go with. I'm telling you, there's nothing better you can do for your marriage than grow in your personal connection with God. Not with the other person, with God. Love your spouse BECAUSE you

understand the love God has for you. It turns everything on it's head. Sure they're needy at times and inconsiderate, so are you. Sure they don't pay attention to everything you say, neither do you. Sure they're hard to love at times – so are you. *But God loves you.* And He loved you first, so reflect that love to your spouse. And reflect it to other people as well.

This verse reminds us that God started all of this. He's the one who caused the first domino in the chain to fall. He initiates. He begins. He's the catalyst of it all.

And there's some debate here over the actual translation. Some of your Bibles say, "[We love Him because He first loved us,](#)" others says simply, "[We love because He first loved us.](#)" I think the latter is better because it includes the former. All of our love is inspired and provoked by God, regardless of the target. We focus on Him and we focus on others simply because of what He has already done in us. Like the electrons flowing through the Christmas lights – the filaments or LEDs don't work on their own – they respond to what is happening to them.

So, if you want to love Him, or love others, consider the love He has for you and it will provoke you to love others.

But then we end the chapter with a warning.

[20 If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?](#)
[21 And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God *must* love his brother also.](#)

As we have been going through the book of 1 John we have noticed that John is very interested in helping us test our faith. He's pretty blunt about the fact that there can be people around the church who call themselves Christian, or who think of themselves as 'spiritual' people, but they're not actually born again in Christ. And he's been giving us several tests to use to determine someone's true identity.

One of those tests is whether or not you're completing the circuit of God's love – is He flowing into you and then back out of you?

I don't know about you, but I still can't get over the fact that John just flat out says if you call yourself a Christian, but these things aren't happening, you're a liar. He's very direct in his communication, isn't he? It's very strong language, but it's also a VERY important subject with profound eternal consequences, so he wants to make sure we get things right.

He wants us to understand how essential it is that Christians love each other, not just because it's some good and holy thing you need to do, one more item for your to-do list. No, He wants us to love so that the love of God is perfected in us. So that we see and experience things of God that we wouldn't otherwise. So that others in need are served and cared for like we've been. And so that we gain confidence in the condition of our soul.

Loving others is evidence of what God is doing us. What comes out of us shows what's really coming into us. God wants to be the answer to both, and so He comes to us and loves us first. Will we respond or will we resist? That's the question we need to deal with today.

In a moment we're going to receive communion, we're going to take into us this reminder of what God has done for us, and as we prepare to do that, I want you to take a minute and consider: how am I doing?

Who am I loving? And I want you to come up with names. Actual people. Who are you loving? In which of your relationships is God's love being perfected? Some of you might be gushing out like a fire hose – praise God. Others might barely be a trickle. Think about it and surrender yourself to God – ask Him to come rushing in so that He might He might come gushing out, and ask Him to blow out any of the gunk that is in His way, so that you can give and receive His love with ever decreasing obstruction.