



1 John 4:7-21

"The Love of God"

By Mike Clark

1 John 4:7-21

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. ¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in 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. 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. 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. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. 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. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

INTRODUCTION –

As we have done since the beginning of this series, I want to remind you again of the two themes that John is helping us to see – LIGHT and LOVE.

1st – Light – Truth that stems from Christ and is sustained in Fellowship with each other.

2nd – Love – Treasuring God and how we value each other.

Now just to briefly review, last week, Pastor Jody preached on testing the spirits.

And we learned that we test the spirits to steer clear of false doctrine.

We were given the reason we test the spirits - because there are unwanted and foolish opinions out there.

We were also given the way we test the spirits – seeing whether or not someone confesses that Jesus is Divine.



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Lastly, we were told the benefit of testing the spirits – you will overcome and continue to overcome.

Now throughout this little letter, John has been teaching us the tests of how to know that you're a genuine Christian.

He's given us numerous tests to use, numerous pieces of evidence to look for in our lives, that work together to help us gain assurance of our salvation.

And now for the third time, John lays out the 'LOVE' test.

John wants his readers to know how important love is in the life of a person who has been transformed by the Gospel.

From the beginning to the end of this text, John gives us strong encouragement to love one another.

And right in the middle of that encouragement, John presents a moving summary of the gospel.....the gospel as both a model and motivation for our love toward one another.

John has already made it clear that love is one of the evidences of the new birth. Now he goes on to claim that Christians should love one another because God has loved them.

Point 1 – Loving one another makes God's love visible

1 John 4:7 - Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

As John starts this section, he addresses his readers as beloved which is fitting because the main theme of this section is love.

And the apostle uses the Greek word agape for love all through this section.

He doesn't use eros which is the kind of romantic, emotional, or worldly love or phileo, which refers to affection between friends.

He uses agape which is the love of self-sacrificing service.

John has already described Christians as people who love their brothers in chapter 2 and appealed to them to love one another in chapter 3.



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Now he says it again urging his readers to act in a way that is in consistent with who they are in Christ.

He grounds his appeal in the fact that love comes from God. It has its origin in God. The beginning of love is found in the love shown by God.

John is making two parallel statements. He is saying that all love comes from God; therefore, all lovers have been born of God, that is born again, regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit.

John tells us more about what it means to be born of God back in his gospel in chapter 3.

***John 3:1-8** - Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."*

That's what it means to be born again.

And listen God is sovereign over the new birth. This isn't something we do on our own. We didn't have any part in our physical birth, and we don't have any part in our spiritual birth. This is God's work alone!

This is the doctrine of regeneration. Regeneration is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit where divine life is given.

It's instantaneous, its accomplished solely by the power of the Holy Spirit where He uses the means of the Word of God and grants or enables a person to repent and respond in faith to the divine provision of salvation.

But to get back to what John is saying in verse 7 of our passage, John is basically giving us a definition of love in this verse.



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Now the question that might come to your mind is this – Does that mean that anyone who shows love is a child of God, regardless of whether they actually believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God? – NO.

The only way you could possibly answer yes is if you take this verse out of its context.

John makes it very clear in many other places that the true child of God both BELIEVES and LOVES.

You might also ask – How is it possible then for people who don't believe in Jesus Christ to love one another as we sometimes see?

Well unbelievers can show love and sometimes they actually love one another better than some Christians love one another.

How do we explain that? And what does that tell us about unbeliever's standing before God when they do show love like that?

Well theologically speaking, this has to do with both the doctrines of creation and common grace.

Because men are created in the image of God, even though that image has been affected by the fall, it's still the image of God and so they still have the capacity to love.

In addition, through the preaching of the gospel people are made aware of the obligation to love one another and they may be influenced by gospel preaching even though they fail to respond to the call to believe on Christ.

Ultimately, it's belief in Jesus Christ AND love for God that matters. So, love alone isn't necessarily a sign of being born of God.

1 John 4:8 - *Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

As we have so frequently seen, John emphasizes his point by stating the opposite. A person who does not love does not know God.

A person cannot come into a real relationship with a loving God without being transformed into a loving person.



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Those whose lives are not characterized by love for others are not Christians no matter what they claim.

And then what John says at the end of this verse provides the theme for the next few verses.

John says that God is love. The bible also says that God is light and that God is Spirit. These are all expressions of the nature of God that John uses.

God by nature is love, and therefore He defines love. It doesn't define Him. Don't miss that. That is so important to understand.

Now people will wrongly exalt the love of God as his supreme feature just because it isn't offensive to people. They will boast of God's love and yet hardly or never mention the justice or wrath of God.

Why? – because they don't want to offend anyone, and they don't want to have to say things that may make them or others uncomfortable.

You'll also hear arguments like if God is all loving, why does he allow evil and how could a loving God send anyone to hell?

Answer – because God is not only a God of love but a God of justice, therefore he must punish sin.

But when John says that God is love he is talking about God's actions, not just God's feelings of love.

And think about this – when John tells us that God is love, he is expressing the immense gulf between God and men because it could never be said of any man that he is love. Only God is completely loving.

John then goes on to describe how God has shown his love.

1 John 4:9 - 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.

This verse sounds a lot like John 3:16 and John may be reminding us of that tremendous declaration.

John 3:16 - "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.



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Jesus Christ is the preeminent manifestation of God's love.

The Puritan Thomas Goodwin said: *"Christ is love covered over with flesh."*

The coming of Jesus is the visible sign of the love of God. The cross of Christ is the visible appearance of God's love that stretches back beyond our vision into the depths of eternity.

God did this 'so that we might live through him.'

Ultimately, I think this refers to God loving sinful people and sending His Son to die on the cross so that we might live, so that we wouldn't suffer in hell forever, so that we might have life in his name, eternal life.

But it can also refer to this point - Because of God's love that he has shown to His people, the saints should surely follow His example and love others with sacrificial, Christlike love.....

....so that we might love others through His power working in us.

1 John 4:10 - *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.*

John has now described the character of God's love and he goes even further in this verse.

Love is not that we loved God, but that God loved us. God took the first step in love, and that while we were enemies!

We can't begin to understand love by considering the nature of our love for God.

Instead, love is to be seen in the prior act of God who loved us and expressed his love by sending His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Now Pastor Jody talked about this word propitiation back in chapter 2. And I want to remind you that propitiation refers to a covering for sin.

We see the deepest meaning of the term love in this verse. Love means forgiving the sins of those who will inherit salvation and remembering their sins no more.



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Listen – God loved people who hated Him, provoked his anger, sinned horribly and frequently against Him.

He loved us in this way....that He sacrificed His Son to satisfy His justice and pacify his anger that He had against us for our disobedience.

That's what propitiation is.

Propitiation means that Jesus came to be our sin-remover, our wrath-appeaser, our condemnation-canceller, our guilt-deliverer.

This is what God has done for rebellious sinners who deserve eternity in hell. God has pardoned their sins against himself at his own cost.

Now the world will deny left and right that a loving God needs to be propitiated for human sin and even suggest that this makes him less than loving.

But what they fail to see is the depth of God's love and how that love bears the wounds inflicted on it by sinful mankind and offers full and free pardon!

James Denney in his book "The Death of Christ" writes, *"So far from finding any kind of contrast between love and propitiation, the apostle can convey no idea of love to anyone except by pointing to the propitiation – love is what is manifested there; and he can give no account of the propitiation but by saying 'Behold what manner of love.'* For him to say 'God is love' is exactly the same as to say, 'God has in his Son made atonement for the sin of the world.'" – James Denney

1 John 4:11 - *Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

So those who have received this incredible love have no choice in their response. Their sins have been removed by the gracious act of God.

God has loved them in such a way that should just stir up adoring wonder at the magnitude of his sacrificial giving. They can't do anything else but show love to one another.

John cannot conceive how a person could experience divine love and remain unmoved by the obligation to love other people in the same way as God has loved him.

I want you to notice that John doesn't say that experience of God's love should force us to love him in return. Rather he speaks of our obligation to love others.



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Although John is thinking primarily of love within the Christian fellowship, the fact that he starts from a statement of God's love for sinners strongly suggests that his vision isn't limited to the church but extends to the world.

John then says if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

1 John 4:12 - No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

Nobody, he says, has ever seen God. This is a familiar thought in the OT and John speaks of this in John 1.

John 1:18 - No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Jesus also said the same truth twice in John 5 and 6.

So, it's clear that John has that verse in mind in our text. In John 1:18 a contrast is made between the invisibility of God and the fact of his revelation in his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ.

Here the contrast is with the way in which God is made known to us in the context of mutual love.

Now this doesn't imply that those who love one another will be granted a vision of God.

The idea is that if we fulfill the command to love one another, then we experience the presence of God in ourselves.

People will not see God's love unless believers love one another. If believers love one another, God will be on display testifying that He abides in them, and His love is perfected in them.

Now we're again faced with the question of whose love is being talked about.

Does his love mean God's love for us or our love for God or God's kind of love?

I would submit to you that a combination of the first and third options seems to be the best fit.



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When we love others, God's love for us has reached its full effect in creating the same kind of love as his in us.

It's only when a person loves his fellow Christians on a very practical level that he fully experiences the love of God in his own heart and knows the presence of God with him.

John's point is that loving one another is indispensable in a religion which longs to have a true knowledge of God.

We can't find God by withdrawing from the world and its obligation to love one another.

In addition, we can't find God merely by trying to love one another. True religion comes only through believing in Jesus Christ AND accepting his command to love one another.

Point 2 – Loving one another provides assurance of our salvation

1 John 4:13 - *By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.*

So, John now begins to summarize the grounds on which a person may be sure that he is a Christian.

Those grounds include that a true Christian has received the Spirit, knows that Jesus has come as the Savior of the world, and the true Christian has come to experience personally the love of God.

John is again developing the thought of love by stating that when we show love, these are signs that we know God and have fellowship with him.

First – A true Christian has been given the Holy Spirit.

In a similar thought that we saw back in 1 John 3:24, John says that we can know that God lives in us by the fact that he has given us the Spirit.

And he broadens out the statement in verse 12 by speaking not only of God living in us but also of our living in God.

Now you might be asking yourself how do I know if I have received the Spirit?



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Well, you can first look at your experiences. Do you have confidence in prayer? Do you have an inward conviction that you are God's child? Do you see spiritual gifts at work in you?

Now you can have some of these experiences and not be a Christian. There are many people who are deceived about whether or not they are a Christian.

Just because someone professes belief in Christ or loves his fellow man or claims to have spiritual gifts does not mean they are then a true Christian.

It's the combination of these kinds of things in a harmonious unity that makes up true Christianity.

MacArthur says this – "Having already focused on the Father and the Son within his discussion on perfect love, John now emphasizes the role of the Spirit. By noting the work of each member of the Trinity, the apostle underscores the Trinitarian origins of perfect love. Such love, which is accomplished through the work of each member of the Trinity and subsequently manifested in the lives of believers, finds its source in the triune God, who from eternity past enjoyed perfect fellowship as Father, Son, and Spirit. As those who abide in God, believers will reflect His love, because God abides in them and His Spirit is at work in their hearts." – John MacArthur.

Verse 8 of John 3 that we read earlier compares the Holy Spirit to the wind. Jesus said you can only see the Spirit's effects.

Just like you can't see wind, you also can't see physically if someone has the Spirit. It's only when you look at someone's life and see their faith at work can we know if someone has the Spirit.

John then gives a further characteristic of the true Christian. A true Christian holds to the apostolic faith.

1 John 4:14 - And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

John states that he has born witness that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

We also find Jesus referred to as Savior in Luke 2:11, Acts 5:31, Ephesians 5:23, Philippians 3:20, and all 3 chapters in Titus just to mention a few.



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And I think what we have here is really the testimony of the church as a whole rather than merely of the original eyewitnesses of the earthly ministry of Jesus.

The confession that is made is similar to verse 9. Verse 9 describes Jesus as an atoning sacrifice for sins, a propitiation. Here he is called the Savior of the world.

It is through being the former that Jesus can be the later.

In other words, it is through being an atoning sacrifice for sins that Jesus can be the Savior of the world.

The confession reminds us of the words of the Samaritans in John 4 when they discovered for themselves that Jesus really is the Savior of the world.

John then states that it's only if a person confesses that Jesus is the Son of God that he is joined to God in fellowship.

***1 John 4:15** - Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.*

In other words, the possibility of spiritual fellowship with God depends on the historical fact of the incarnation.

A true Christian will confess that the Father sent the Son and that Son is Jesus.

Now to acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God is not simply to make a statement about who he truly is, but to express obedient trust in the One who possesses such a status.

BOTH are required – belief that Jesus is the Son of God and obedient trust in him.

***1 John 4:16** - 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.*

It's probably best to see this verse as a parallel statement to verse 14.

The believer is sure of his faith because he has personally experienced the love of God. He has come to know it and also to put his trust in it. He is absolutely sure of its reality.

And here John is also thinking not merely the love for us shown by God in the cross but also of the personal experience of his love in our hearts created by the Spirit.



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Beloved - Know and believe God's love for you by trusting God's love that's been shown in the Gospel...in the death of Jesus for you.

And then show that same love to others, that's how you know God loves you and lives in you.

You don't know that God loves you based on how you feel, or by how good things are going for you in your life or even how well you behave.

You know God loves you by BELIEVING the Gospel that declares His unconditional love for you.

For so many true believers, this is so often a point of doubt and struggle: knowing that God loves you.

Do you know that God loves you? Do you believe He loves you? Do you doubt it? Do you sometimes doubt it?

When we struggle to know and believe God's love for us, we are essentially struggling to believe the gospel.

We're believing our feelings instead, or letting our circumstances create doubt.

So, if you want to know for sure that God loves you – DON'T look to yourself, or your life, or the world around you, and don't trust your feelings.

Look to the cross. Look outside yourself. Look to Christ and what He's done for you.

He died to save you in spite of what you've done, or how you feel, or in spite of your sorrows or trials.

The Puritans said: When you don't understand justification...When you don't trust the promises of the Gospel...it makes every trial a double trial.

Because not only do you grieve at the trial that you may be facing, but you're asking yourself – 'Does God still love me?'

When you know and believe His love for you because of the cross, then you gain the ability to show his love through you.



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When you receive the grace of God for yourself, along with it you also receive the grace to give God's love to others.

So, we see three characteristics of the Christian – possession of the Spirit, confession of Jesus as the Son of God, and living in the love of God. On that basis we can have a firm foundation for Christian hope!

Point 3 – Loving one another brings confidence for the day of judgment.

1 John 4:17- 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 vital question to ask yourself is – Will you have confidence in that all important day?

How can we be sure that we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming?

John says, "By this." He also said this back in verse 13. Pastor Jody talked about this a few weeks ago as well. John is often saying "By this," referring to what he has just previously stated or what he is about to say.

How is love perfected? – By having the three characteristics of the true Christians – The Spirit, confession of Jesus as the Son of God and living in the love of God.

This experience of mutual love is fully realized in the fact that we can have confidence on the day of judgment.

The day of judgment refers in the broadest sense to the final time of reckoning before God.

Believers can live their lives with confidence as they look to the day when Christ returns and they stand before God.

Interestingly, John uses the same Greek word here for confidence that he used back in chapter 3 referring to the confidence that believers can have that God will grant their prayer requests.

So, boldness and lack of fear should characterize believers whenever they think ahead to God's time of judgment.



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John is going to explain further how this is the case in the next verse when he tells us that in a relationship of love between ourselves and our Judge, there can be no fear of him as Judge but only the confidence which is born of love.

But before reaching this principle he makes the comment that this confidence is possible because in this world we are like him, like Jesus.

Although we are in the sinful world with its temptations, nevertheless we don't belong to the world, but we stand in the same relationship to God as that of Jesus to his Father and we live as Jesus lived.

Listen beloved – Understand this – The Father treats his children the same way He does His Son Jesus Christ. God clothes believers with the righteousness of Christ.

The Father grants the Son's perfect love and obedience to believers.

Someday we will stand before God's throne as confidently as Jesus does.

So, John is stating the characteristics which ought to be found in every true Christian, that he is like Jesus.

1 John 4:18- 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.

Fear and love cannot coexist. This is why a person who stands in a relationship of love to God can look forward to the future day of judgment without fear and apprehension.

In contrast the person who professes Christ but fears His return shows evidence that something is not right, because all true saints love His appearing – 2 Tim 4:8.

Again, the question arises whether the thought is of God's love for us or of our love for him.

In the former case, we don't need to be afraid of One who loves us. In the latter case, we can't love and fear simultaneously.

Probably the best interpretation is a combination of the two – in a relationship of mutual love there is no possibility of fear.

Where there is a perfect relationship of love, it drives out all fear of God because as John says, fear is bound up with punishment.



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What John means by punishment is not exactly clear, but more than likely he has in mind the fear of final retribution.

And since the person who stands in a relationship of love to God stands in no danger of condemnation and judgment, it follows that he has no need to be afraid of God.

If a person is afraid of God, it's because the love of God has not yet filled his heart and driven out all fear.

There is, of course, a place for fear in the life of the Christian. The word fear can be used for the Christian in the sense of reverence for God which characterized believers in the OT.

There is also a sense in which the believer must serve God with fear and trembling as Philippians 2 says.

So, there is clearly a distinction between reverence for God and fear of judgment.

1 John 4:19- *We love because he first loved us*

Our love for God is based on God's prior love for us. It was God's perfect and eternal love that first sovereignly drew believers to Him and enabled them to reflect his love to others.

And our response should be one of gratitude. The more we realize how much God has loved us, the more we will realize our obligation to love him in return.

It's good for us to constantly renew our knowledge of God's love as we read of it in the Bible, as we hear it proclaimed in the worship of the church, and as we consider ways in which our whole life has been molded by experiences of God's love and care for us.

1 John 4:20- *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.*

If a person claims to love God and yet fails to love his fellow Christians, that person is a liar.

According to John's gospel Jesus laid particular emphasis on the need for brotherly love in John 13.



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John 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.*

A person may deceive other people by declaring that he loves God; but since God can't be seen, there is no way of telling whether he truly loves God.

But a person can't easily deceive others regarding his love for other Christians; since they CAN be seen, the person's relationship with them is also visible.

So, it follows that if a person is seen not loving his brothers, it's unlikely that he loves God.

Indeed, he CAN'T love God, since one part of love for God is love for one's brothers.

1 John 4:21- *And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.*

The point that John is making is underlined by a final reminder that God's command to those who love him is that they also love one another.

Love for God and love for one's brothers are inseparable.

Listen – it's easy to have a kind of love for God which doesn't recognize the obligation to love one another. Such love for God falls short of being real love for him, since it fails to obey his commandments.

But brotherly love seeks nothing in return, it unconditionally forgives, bears others' burdens, and sacrifices to meet their needs.....and listen....brotherly love also does not tolerate false doctrine or habitual sin.

That's hard, and we need to be gracious at the same time we confront those things, but that's another way we love the saints. Love is the command that's inherent in the Gospel.

1 John 3:11 – *For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.*

Our obedience to that command is not a fearful striving to prove our love for God...

Loving one another is a humble and happy **RESPONSE** to God's love for us.



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So, this command is not burdensome.

In light of what Jesus has done for us, how can we do anything less?

Love is a gracious gift we give to others out of the love with which He has EBRACED US and PROVIDED FOR US through the compassionate sacrifice of his Son.

Love is the most God-like act of all.

And so, may His Gospel and His Spirit train us for a life of love.