

God Is

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him;¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (John 3:16-17 ESV)

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Revelation 4:8 ESV)

God Is Love

December 20th, 2020

John 17:24-26, 1 John 4:7-12

Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to John 17. We're also going to be looking at 1 John 4 later on in the sermon, so feel free to find that as well and keep a finger on the page.

Next Sunday will be Christmas Sunday when we will come again to the manger to celebrate the incarnation. This advent season, we have been meditating on the attributes of God. Who is this glorious God that has come to dwell with us? We have seen that He is triune – one God forever existing in three persons. We have seen that He is holy. This morning, we will consider one more of God's attributes on our way to the manger. In 1 John 4:8 we read:

Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:8 ESV)

God is love.

The great theologian John Owen wrote:

Every other discovery of God, without this, will but make the soul fly from him; but if the heart be once much taken up with this the eminency of the Father's love, it cannot choose but be overpowered, conquered, and endeared unto him.¹

¹ John Owen as quoted by Micheal Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 97.

I'm thankful that we are walking through this just one week after our "God is holy" sermon, because I find that we often treat these two attributes of God as if they are opposite sides of the coin. We say things like: "God is love, *but* He is *also* holy" as if the one somehow contradicts the other. They don't. Commentator I. Howard Marshall notes:

God is all-loving and, equally, all-holy (1:5). These two characteristics do not stand in opposition to one another but belong together and determine his actions.²

Sometimes I hear Christians say things like: "God needs to punish sin because He is holy, but He has provided a way of escape because He is love." But, to speak that way is to suggest that God is like Jekyll and Hyde – that His attributes are at war within Himself: One day his holiness grabs a hold of the steering wheel and the world is overcome by a flood; the next day His love grabs a hold of the steering wheel and the flood rescinds. Listen closely because this is a fundamental truth: EVERYTHING that God does is a reflection SIMULTANEOUSLY of His love *and* His holiness. So, God hates and punishes sin because of His holy love. And God rescues and redeems sinners because of His holy love. They are inseparably interwoven.

If God's holiness was an unloving holiness, we would all be dead. If God was omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent but was not love, He would be a being to be dreaded but not delighted in. But, thankfully, our God has revealed Himself as our Father, and all of His other attributes are filled with and animated by His holy love.

Therefore, as we turn our attention to the love of God today, we are not taking a step *away* from what we learned last week about His holiness. Rather, we are stepping in *deeper*. The God who is triune and holy is also the God who is love.

This morning, I want to spend our time asking the question:

What Does It Mean That God Is Love?

² I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John (NICNT)*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 213.

By way of a disclaimer, we are not going to answer this answer comprehensively this morning. But, as we consider the two texts before us, we will learn three foundational truths that flow out of this attribute of God.

The word “love” is thrown around so flippantly today that it sometimes feels as if it is void of all meaning. One person says, “You love who you love” and they clearly understand love to be a *feeling*. Another person says, “I’m going to try to love him anyway” and they seem to understand love as a *choice*. Still, another says, “If you love me, show me” and they obviously believe that love is an *action*. And all of that is true, to be clear, but those definitions in and of themselves are lacking.

The reality is, we cannot and will not ever truly understand love until we grow in our understanding of God. Because love is from God. Therefore, if we are going to understand what it means to say that God is love, we’re going to need to shape that definition with His thoughts, not ours.

To that end, we’re going to consider two texts this morning. The first text is found in John 17. Here, we will consider what is often referred to as Jesus’ high priestly prayer. In these verses, we discover something that is absolutely astounding. This is a prayer that Jesus prayed FOR YOU. Verses 24-26, the verses that we are going to be considering this morning, present us with the actual words that Jesus – the second Person of the Trinity – prayed for the church. On the night before his crucifixion

We’re going to walk through a few passages this morning, and we’re going to begin in the final verses of a prayer that is commonly referred to as Jesus’ high priestly prayer. On the night that Jesus was betrayed – on the night when Jesus knew that he would be arrested and dragged away to a corrupt trial that would lead to a bloody, horrific crucifixion – Jesus stopped and prayed for you.

Let that sink in for a minute. One commentator notes here:

He had regard for us even then; therefore, each born-again-soul can say, “He prayed for *me*”!³

³ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1945), 956.

But what was his prayer for you? That's what we are going to consider this morning. Look with me now at John 17:24-26. We read:

²⁴ Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” (John 17:24-26 ESV)

Jesus' prayer for the church – his prayer for you and me – is that we would be helped to know the Father so that the love of the Father would be in us. Let's spend some time unpacking that now under the question of our main heading. What does it mean that God is love? To say that “God is love” is to say, first of all, that:

1. He forever exists in intimate fellowship

Before I unpack that, it might be helpful to start from the ground up. Because we were made in the image of God, we expect his communicable attributes to be reflected – however dimly – in us.

One commentator notes:

It is because men are created in the image of God, an image which has been defaced but not destroyed by the Fall, that they still have the capacity to love.⁴

I would argue that this attribute of God's love is very much on display in our relationships with one another, though we rarely think about it.

One of my mentors, Tim Kerr, shared a great illustration for this recently and I found it to be really helpful. Imagine your life is like a house. You don't just invite anyone into the house. But the MORE that you love someone, the more willing you are to invite them in to see all that is there. Social media is like the garden and the front step. We all work hard to keep appearances up so that everyone who passes by will assume that we have it together. We might even let some

⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John (NICNT)*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 212.

people inside to see our relatively tidy entrance and living room. On rare occasions, we might even dare to take the risk of allowing someone into the back room where the laundry is on the floor and the dishes are piled high.

But then, even with the people that we love the MOST, there is a closet in one of the back rooms where we have a mess hidden that we don't ever want anyone to see. The most horrifying, embarrassing things are in there, and it is a part of us that we keep hidden even from our closest loves.

We all have that closet. We all live with some semblance of fear that, if the people that we care about *really knew* us, they would leave. To LOVE someone, is to take the dangerous risk of allowing someone to fully know you and to take the equally dangerous risk of fully knowing someone else. This is the aspect of love that I suspect most of us in this room struggle with most deeply in our human relationships. But to love someone is to know someone.

This connection between love and knowledge is all over the Bible. Have you ever noticed that one of the euphemisms for sexual intimacy in the Bible is the phrase “and so-and-so *knew* his wife, and she conceived and bore a son”? In the garden, before the Fall, Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed, but then, after the Fall, they were scrambling for fig leaves and hiding from God and each other. Why is that? It's because SIN has ruined our capacity to express and enjoy love as we were made to. Sin causes us to hide from one another, but love is intimate fellowship. Love is knowing and being known.

We see this same language in a warning that Jesus gave to his disciples. Describing the day of judgement, Jesus said:

On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘**I never knew you**; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’
(Matthew 7:22-23 ESV)

I never KNEW you.

Now, assuming we understand that on a human level, let's look again at this text. Jesus is praying to the Father that we might be engrafted into the eternal loving relationship that has forever existed between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. But, in order for us to enter into that relationship, we need to come to KNOW God. Sin has distorted our view of Him. We see Him dimly. We distrust Him and we distort Him, and we HIDE from him, therefore Jesus prayed:

²⁵ O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me.²⁶ I made known to them your name, **and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them**, and I in them.” (John 17:25-26 ESV)

Notice that there is no hiding in the Godhead. The Father perfectly knows the Son and the Son perfectly knows the Spirit. That relationship of unity and intimacy is FOUNDATIONAL to understanding what it means that God is love.

And in this prayer, Jesus is praying that through him – through his life, death and resurrection – we might KNOW the Father so that we might experience the LOVE of the Father. Because we cannot love Him who we do not know. Knowledge and love go hand in hand. And Jesus is telling us here that the FATHER is revealed through the SON.

Listen: One of the lessons that we learn in this text is that if you want to know God then you need to know Jesus! As the Apostle Paul says,

He is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15a ESV)

Jesus has come to make the Father known to us. Why? SO THAT WE MIGHT LOVE HIM! Because God is love! He refuses to leave us in the dark. He refuses to sit silently while we manufacture false images of who we would like him to be. Because He loves us, he has sent His Son into the world so as to REVEAL HIMSELF to us so as to RESTORE US to the relationship with Him that we were made to enjoy – the relationship that Adam and Eve enjoyed before the Fall.

But this also presents us with a bit of a problem. If we are to enter into this loving relationship with God – this relationship in which we fully know and are fully known – it means that God will see all of the mess in us. To say that God loves us is to say that He has opened the closet door. He has seen the deepest, darkest parts of your heart. He was there with you when you committed that heinous sin that you have been trying for years to forget. All of those dirty habits and embarrassing thoughts that you try so desperately to hide from Him are sitting in clear view. The God who is holy, holy, holy KNOWS you completely!

And that leads naturally to the second thing that we need to see as we consider God’s love. What does it mean to say that God is love? It means that:

2. He gives of Himself sacrificially

At this point, I want to invite you to flip forward in your Bibles to 1 John 4. We’re going to read verses 7-12. John writes:

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. (1 John 4:7-12 ESV)

The word “propitiation” essentially means an offering that brings one back into favor. When Jesus died on the cross, he was a propitiation – an offering on our behalf – that appeased the Father so that we could be brought back into right relationship with Him.

Because God HAS seen the sin. He has seen the vilest, darkest corners of your heart. That sin is not just ugly – it is destructive. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones once said:

Every unhappiness in the human heart at this minute is due to sin. If sin had not entered into this world nobody would be unhappy; there was no unhappiness in life until sin came in.⁵

⁵ Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons*, (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 129.

We talked earlier about that dirty closet in the back of the house – well here is where that illustration falls short. Because that closet doesn't just contain a mess. That closet contains a virus that, left unattended, will grow and destroy you, the people you love, and the creation all around you. Sin DESTROYS. Therefore, love does not and cannot overlook sin. The God who is love will not EVER turn a blind eye to the sin in your life. Stephen Charnock captures this well:

A man may love a gangrened member, because it is a member of his own body, or a member of a dear relation, but he loathes the gangrene in it, more than in those wherein he is not so much concerned.⁶

It is BECAUSE God loves you that He hates your sin! His deep, holy love compels Him to forever due away with that sin.

And THAT is what the doctrine of propitiation is all about. It is about how our loving, holy, Triune God has made a way for the sin of the world to be condemned and abolished once and for all. The Apostle Paul refers to this as the foundation for our confidence. He writes:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, **he condemned sin in the flesh** (Romans 8:1-3 ESV)

Who condemned sin in the flesh? Whose wrath came upon Jesus at Golgotha? God sent His own Son and then HE – that is, GOD – condemned sin in the flesh. God punished sin in the flesh of His Son.

And, John says, THAT is the place – THAT is the doctrine – which most fully reveals the love of God. The death of the Son – the propitiation that opened the door for our restoration to God – is THE New Testament example of love.

So, what does it mean that God is love? It means that He gives of Himself sacrificially.

God gave of Himself by sending His Son to clean up our sinful mess. At the cross, Jesus bore our sin. He took our guilt and shame upon himself and he bore in his flesh the full, unhindered,

⁶ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 457.

righteous wrath of God. To go back to the analogy of the filthy closet, it was as if Jesus was a perfectly clean sponge and he soaked up every last drop of filth from our mess. The sponge was then taken out of the house to the sewer drain and it was rung out until every last drop was done away with. On the cross, Jesus proclaimed:

“It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:30b ESV)

That’s what the cross is. It is the place where God proclaimed in scarlet red letters, “It is finished! I know you! I have seen every single one of your sins. But I don’t see them anymore! I have taken them upon myself so that you can live with me forever!” The Psalmist proclaims:

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:11-12 ESV)

And this, John says, is love.

Finally, what does it mean that God is love? It means that:

3. He goes out and invites others in

God’s love is a SHARING love. It is a love that goes OUT and invites others IN.

The God of the universe came down from His throne and humbled himself to be born in a stable. The God who forever lived in perfect, intimate, loving relationship within Himself chose to create us, and then to redeem us, so as to invite us forever into His loving fellowship. He did this with full knowledge of the price that would need to be paid for our redemption. Within the Godhead, it was decided that Son would go out and suffer so that we could come in and live. Michael Reeves notes here:

Here is a glory no other God would want. Other gods need worship and service and sustenance. But this God needs nothing. He has life in himself - and so much so that he is brimming over. His glory is inestimably good, overflowing, self-giving.⁷

⁷ Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 127.

God didn't make us simply to serve Him or to stand at a distance and admire Him. He made us to DELIGHT in Him and to SHARE in Him. Jesus said that in His high priestly prayer. He prayed:

²² The glory that you have given me **I have given to them**, that they may be one even as we are one (John 17:22 ESV)

How quickly we rush by these verses! Jesus is saying here that, in some measure, he has shared with his church the glory that He received from the Father. And the reason why He shared this glory was so that "they may be one as we are one." God's desire for us is that we would be restored into the perfect, unified, loving relationship that we were created for and that he has forever enjoyed. Therefore, John says:

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. (1 John 4:11-12 ESV)

God's love is a love that entered into our mess so as to bring us out. God's love is a love that gave sacrificially. Therefore, having RECEIVED that love and being now FILLED with that love as we grow in our identity as the image bearers of the GOD WHO IS LOVE, we OVERFLOW with love for one another. Michael Reeves notes:

Thus Jesus Christ, God the Son, is the Logic, the blueprint for creation. He is the one eternally loved by the Father; creation is about the extension of that love outward so that it might be enjoyed by others.⁸

I really like that language. Jesus is the blueprint. In a culture that is obsessed with love of self, Jesus teaches us that true love – the love of God – flows outward.

I recognize that we are five days away from Christmas. Perhaps it seems odd to you that we have spent so much time considering the cross a week before Christmas Sunday. But the manger and the cross are inseparably linked. Everytime you look at the manger, you ought to see the shadow of the cross casting down over it. Jesus was born to die. He came to be a sacrificial lamb – our propitiation. And, John says, this is love.

⁸ Micheal Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 43.

With the time that we have remaining, I want to pull out two practical implications for us as we consider the love of God.

Implications: Living in the Light of His Love

First, I want to consider how this love should impact the way that we relate to one another. God's love should compel you to:

1. Let your guard down and invite others in

To know is to love. Therefore, if you want to love and be loved as God has intended, then you are going to need to let your guard down. And you are going to need to invite others in.

Jesus' prayer for the church was that we would know a unity that resembles the unity that he enjoys with the Father. His desire for the church is that this would be a place where people can be fully known by one another. The church is supposed to be a community in which we can confess our sins. James said:

Therefore, **confess your sins to one another** and pray for one another, that you may be healed. (James 5:16 ESV)

The church is supposed to be a place where we can speak openly and honestly about our victories and defeats. Paul wrote:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. (Romans 12:15 ESV)

And, as we share these trials and difficulties, the church is supposed to be the place where others enter into our brokenness to carry us through. Again, Paul commanded:

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:2 ESV)

The love that these New Testament believers shared included a deep, intimate knowledge of one another. And THAT was what made their witness so compelling to the world. Jesus said this would happen. He said:

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:35 ESV)

We are surrounded by a culture that, by and large, is STARVING for authentic love. We are surrounded by people who KNOW that the inner parts of the house are a mess but that who are afraid to let anyone in to help them clean it up. And, to be honest, I think there is a lot of that going on even in the church. Therefore, if you are going to show the kind of love that paints a picture of God's love, you need to let your guard down. And, let's strive to be a community where people feel SAFE to let their guard down.

Think about your current friendships. Have you cultivated the kind of Christian friendships that would leave your brother or sister feeling safe to bring their deepest concerns to you? If they were struggling with sin, could they share that with you? If they were in the valley of depression, could they reach out to you?

You need to cultivate that.

Let your guard down. Invite others into your life. Invite them into real, authentic relationship. That is the kind of love that resembles the love that we see in our great God.

But I want to close this morning on a more personal note. If you truly understand the love of God, then you will:

2. Learn to rest in His love for you

If you have turned from your sin and placed your trust in Jesus, you do not need to punish yourself for the sins of your past. At the cross, God's holy judgement against sin was poured out in exactly the right amount. There was nothing lacking in Jesus' sacrifice. Therefore, you don't need to wallow in self-loathing any longer. You don't need to hang your head in shame. What John is telling us in today's text is the same thing that he told us in his gospel:

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

When you consider the cross, you should see a number of things: You should see that God is holy. You should see that the wages of sin is death. You should see a sobering reminder of the consequences of your rebellion. Yes, yes and yes. But, what John is teaching us here is that the

NUMBER ONE message that you should see as you look at the cross is that GOD LOVES YOU!
He loves you so much that He gave His own Son for you!

The God of the universe set a plan in motion before the foundation of the world to send His Son to be born of a virgin in the city of Bethlehem and to live a perfect life and then to die a sinner's death so that YOU COULD LIVE! God – who knows your faults and failures more completely than anyone else in the universe – LOVES YOU! He loves you with such a holy, purifying love that He gave of Himself to cleanse you, and to heal you, and to invite you into relationship with Him FOREVER! And, what's more, He sent His Holy Spirit to dwell in your heart. And do you know what one of the primary responsibilities of the Holy Spirit is in the Christian?

God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:5b ESV)

The Holy Spirit is literally *pouring* the love of God out into your heart, Christian. You are loved. You are LOVED!

The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing. (Zephaniah 3:17 ESV)

Christian, the God of the Bible is a God who loves His people so much that He sent His Son to die for them. He is the God who sent His Spirit to continually pour love into our hearts. He is the God who SINGS over us with loud singing. If the God of your imagination ever only looks at you with a scowl, then you HAVE NOT YET UNERSTOOD THE LOVE OF GOD!

To understand the love of God is to put an end to all self-loathing, hiding and shame. God has seen the whole mess – He's opened that hidden closet – and yet He hasn't left you. He's redeemed you. It was a gruesome task. It came at a greater cost than we will ever understand. But, as Jesus said on the cross, "It is FINISHED."

Trust in that. Rest in that. Rejoice in that! That is the appropriate response to the love of God. And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.