

## *Do As He Loved, Not As I Do*

1 Peter 4:7-11

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John Song

It's a pleasure to be with you here today and worship with you all. For those of you who aren't familiar, my name is John Song. I'm the somewhat-new youth director here at Columbia Presbyterian Church. The new car smell is fading away real quick. And in case you were wondering where Reverend Lovelace is this morning, he is at the men's retreat, appropriately participating in manly things. So if you could pray for him, that would be helpful—and the rest of the men who are at the retreat. That would be great.

Well, today we continue our series in 1 Peter. So as you take out your Bibles or turn on your Bibles or swipe to your Bibles to that particular in Scripture, I want to give us a refresher of where we've been and what the next couple of weeks are going to look like in our time of studying God's Word together. We are reminded again that Peter is writing in the Book of 1 Peter to a group of Christians who are in spiritual exile. They come from different ethnic, socioeconomical, and economic backgrounds. And they are living in hostile times, a period where Christianity and Christian ideas are considered to be dangerous both on a political, social, and economic scale. Many new Christians are finding themselves completely challenged and living in opposition to the surrounding culture they live in, and finding that the public discourse and the lifestyles of those around him are finding it difficult to be Christian.

Does any of this sound familiar? It should, because obviously God's Word is not something that just happened in history, but it happens continually. And so Peter starts the letter, and as we've been studying together, he starts the letter off in the first chapters talking about the indicative of who you are in Christ, reminding them of their identity. And where we are and where we've been stationed the last couple weeks is talking now about the imperative, the implications, of what does it mean to live for Christ. So we'll be reading this section of Scripture that we've been reading together for the last couple of weeks now, 1 Peter 4:7-11, and we will focus our time specifically on verse eight. So I will read this right now, 1 Peter 4:7-11.

The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. [1 Peter 4:7-11, ESV]

This is the Word of Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

Father, as we focus on what it means to love each other as a church in community, Lord, I pray that our love would be rooted in Christ himself—not in our own ability to love, which fails so often, but that we would be reminded of the cross, we would be reminded of the truth of the Gospel here today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

So today we are focusing on verse eight. So if you want to look at that verse once again, I'll read it again. And we're going to be spending the bulk of our time focusing on what does this mean for us as a church, and what does Peter mean when he talks about love? So let's read it again: "Above all, keep loving

one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.” It’s often difficult to speak on a sermon on an abstract concept such as love, particularly a concept that our culture has defined widely.

Love has become a word where it can either be the most powerful word you can hear—“I love you,” right? Or it can be the most useless word that you can ever hear, like, “Oh my gosh, I love Justin Bieber.” You know? The word “love” can be used—it’s so varied that it just becomes very hard. I mean, if you take a look at even the love songs that have been written over the past fifty years, you see our culture is completely contrary when it comes to what love is, right?

Partridge Family in 1970 tells us that they think that they love us, right? The Savage Garden in 1999 assures us, “No, I knew I loved you before I met you.” Bad English, the hair band of the 90s, tells us that love is about the nights when we fight about it, never dream of giving up—that’s the price of love. Well, Jennifer Lopez contradictorily says our love doesn’t cost a thing. If you think love is eternal, Whitney Houston tells us that I’ll always love you—the late Whitney Houston. Whereas, John Legend and Guns and Roses says, “You know what? I used to love you, and I’ll put you right back in your quandary of misery and loneliness.” Famously, Stevie Wonder says that “I just called to say that I love you.” But don’t worry, Drake contradicts that, and he says, “You know what? You used to call me on my cell phone late at night when you needed my love.” And perhaps, you know, the best example of all these contradictory statements of love can be found in this one song, the musical prophet of prophets, Meatloaf, right? Where he says: “I will do anything for love, but I won’t do that,” whatever that is.

So before we begin, we need to ask ourselves the proverbial question again of what are we talking about when we talk about love? Or more specifically, what is Peter talking about when he talks about love? I mean, songs aside, if we take our queues about what love is from our surrounding cultures, things get very confusing. There seems to be no way to center or understand what love truly is. So we read books and, you know, these books are helpful, but sometimes they may oversimplify things. And so love is only about six love languages—you know, if you touch and you spend time then things will be fine. Or maybe four-letter personality types. If you’re an introvert, you need to be loved this way, and if you’re an extrovert, you need to be loved that way. And those can be helpful. But if that were all there is to it, then why—let me ask you, ladies and gentlemen, here today—why do we struggle so much with love? Why does our culture struggle so much about it? Why do we fight so much over it?

It’s precisely this grand mystery that gives us pause and dares us to ask questions that go beyond the tangible, the practical, the comprehensible, the scientific or rational. Love, as Peter defines it, is a central Christ-like love. Or to put it simply in those first two words in verse eight: above all, love. Here’s what I mean by this, that love is more than just something that we can tangibly comprehend. I got the honor of being able to attend a lecture by John Lennox. Some of you may know him as an Oxford professor and a Christian apologist who has gone around the country and the world, really, debating new atheists—Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Michael Shermer.

And as he was talking, he reminded me of a debate that he had with Richard Dawkins, specifically. Richard Dawkins is an Oxford scientist who believes that all religion is poisonous and horrible for the world, and that we should only be talking about what we can scientifically and rationally explain and know. And so Dawkins, in this debate—famously, he was claiming that faith is a word that you use when it requires no evidence, and that therefore faith or all religion is weak and without sustentative scientific proof, therefore we should be thinking it mundane, trivial, and inconsequential. Well, John Lennox brilliantly turns to Dawkins and asks him this question. He says, “Well, Dawkins, I hear what you’re saying, but I presume that you have faith in the idea that your wife loves you, right? Is there any evidence for it?” And Dawkins sheepishly looks at Lennox and says, “Of course there’s evidence for it,” and he proceeds to list the ideas of expressions of love that his wife gives to him. And John Lennox just smiles throughout, charming Irishman, and nods his head.

Because, you see, Dawkins does not understand what he just conceded to Lennox. You see, Lennox was getting at, that there are concepts like the word “love” that go beyond the rationalistic evidentially-based scientific means for understanding and for purpose in life and whom we chose to love and what we chose to love is. Why did you wake up in the morning? Who do you chose to love? Those are not scientific questions. And as famously as the Rabbi David Wolf did in an apologetic debate against Dawkins, he says, “But you live your life by those questions.” You see?

Indeed, if love is simply a chemical reaction to another individual, love was reduced to physical expressions without understanding how and why love has driven us, then why have we not been able to grasp it? Why is it still so incomprehensible? Well, I believe Scripture gives us some answers here. You see, love in the Scripture is never up to the interpretation of the individual in the same way that our culture defines love. In our culture, love is defined based on affinity, emotionality, logic, philosophy, and so on, and so on, to the point where we’re just completely confused. But in Scripture, love is always tied down not to a thought or an idea or an expression, but to a person. We read statements saying that God is love—that the Lord is gracious, slow to anger, rich in love. Love, in other words, by definition is tied to that. And one of the reasons why it is such a grand mystery is that it’s tied to the greatest mystery of all, the grandest mystery of all—God himself.

The Old Testament speaks to this reality in that passage in Deuteronomy that we read this morning. “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” And this was designed as categorical instructions to parents to help them to understand how to raise their children, and this was the primary concept that they wanted to know. It was called the *shama*. It was the idea that in the children’s life, the most important thing that they could ever begin to grasp and comprehend was that God is love and that we should love him as well.

And so how does God reveal this love to us? He does that through extending his grace to us in the person and the work of Jesus Christ. And the pages of the Gospel and in the passages that we even read this morning, we see God incarnate making himself known to us and displaying in every facet of his being and expression, every word that was spoken through his tongue, the nails in his hands and his death and resurrection that he bore for our sins—this is love personified. It’s the fullest. The love of Jesus Christ stretches out to every person in every situation in life. It stretches out to the Samaritan, the leper, the prostitute, the Pharisee, the fisherman, the children.

So when Peter speaks in verse eight saying, “Above all, love,” he is not speaking generalities here, ladies and gentlemen. He’s saying that love is central to the picture of who God is, of who Jesus is, and that we are to unite under this banner. And when we display love to one another as a community in Christ, we are displaying a picture of Christ—and more than just a kind word or gesture, but we’re revealing to others the picture of God himself when we love those in need. Love is central to Peter’s understanding of relationships within the church, and without it, we find ourselves fragmented, in disharmony, jealousy, blame-shifting. And everything would be all right—Peter tells us again and again in this letter—if we were to have the mindset of, above all, love.

Peter goes on in this verse not just to talk about a central Christ-like love, but also a constant Christ-like love. Now, if anyone has ever read the Gospels casually, you can imagine why this might be a little bit of an awkward thing for Peter to say to his audience. I mean, just a casual peak through the Gospels and you’ll raise your eyebrow a little bit at Peter being the one to tell everyone to love each other constantly. Right? I mean, I can imagine the church reading this, staring and thinking about Peter—and to quote Seth Myers in Saturday Night, “Really? Like, really?” Paul, you are telling us to love each other earnestly? Really? I mean, like, weren’t you the guy who said you would, like, never abandon Christ, and then, like, minutes later he, like, denied him? Right? I mean, you cut off a high priest’s ear. Really? Like, you want us to love like that? I mean, that’s not exactly the most faithful thing, right? I mean, like, Peter, weren’t you the one who kind of fell asleep on Jesus’s last day when he was going up there to pray and he told you to pray? Really? You’re the guy telling us to love each other earnestly?

Now, Peter could have easily copped out by doing the easy exercise that most evangelicals, particularly pastors do, in the phrase, “Do as I say, not as I do.” Right? That could have been his large defense, if Peter was making the claim that his own righteousness was par excellence on how love should be earnest and constant. But it is completely impossible for his life to be an example of that. It’s completely impossible for our lives to be an example of that. Even in my own life, I’m reminded day by day of my own failures in my leadership, in my character, my ability to love those in society and the world, my own failures to love those whom society deems unlovable. And I’m sure if you talk to anyone here, they will probably state something along the same lines. In fact, there’s been study and study done on reasons why people leave the church and why people never return, and high on the list in every single one of these surveys that you look at, it’s the reasons why people leave the church that it seems that Christians are hypocritical.

And we certainly need to understand and embrace that reality of our sin in our hearts and lives. And we can try and be defense and say, “Well, you know, Christians aren’t perfect.” But I don’t think “do as I say, not as I do” is really the model for us. I think Peter is saying something a little bit different here. In his exhortation to keep on loving each other earnestly, he’s not advocating a fake posture of love or advocating, look at our lives as the example. No, Peter is saying, “Do as he loved. Do as Christ loved, not as I do.” The community of Christ, for all its imperfections and faults, can be constantly loving through the church in the personal work of Jesus Christ—not through our own merit.

So rather than looking for love inwardly in ourselves, saying, “I am the example of how you should love each other,” we must look to the love of God in Christ. If we recall his faithfulness and love to us when we are faithless, to understand that we have no more higher moral ground to stand on—when we exhort each other to love, we are saying, “Love like Christ loved, not like we have loved.” And when we do that, you see, that’s where we are able to, in humility, stop pointing the finger and saying, “Well, you don’t do that,” or, “You’re hypocritical.” We’re able to point upward and say, “You know what? We can love because Christ has indeed loved us first.”

And this is, I think, key for us as we try to express love to each other. I mean, isn’t there something unbelievably cathartic when you say to someone without filter or agenda or pretension that you love them? That regardless of their state of being, who they are or what they’ve done, they are deeply treasured and loved just simply because of who they are in the image of God? And deserving of that love not because of their sterling record or because of all the things they’ve done for you, or not because of all the ways they’ve failed to execute on that love—but just love because they are loved by Christ.

And if you haven’t been able to say that to someone recently, might I suggest that before you leave today, you give that a shot? Particularly my dear youth group students. We are prone to withhold that statement that we love our family or we love our parents. We think that will make us uncool, right? Brothers and sisters, if Peter’s exhortation is to do as Christ loved, it’s important for us to hear from each other constantly, often, that we do indeed care for each other. And not just to say it, but in acts of love towards one another as a church—to do it with earnestness in our hearts, to try and reflect the character of Christ. Not that we can achieve it, but because Christ has set the example for us.

And I get why we might be scared to do this. We’re scared in many ways to give away love for fear of what might happen when that occurs. We’re scared that our love won’t be reciprocated in the same fashion. We’re scared of being hurt. And I know that that’s hard, especially living in this area, Howard County, Montgomery County, this region of the world. Because love is really much like an economy. Let me explain what that means. So I taught in Maryland Public Schools for three years. I was in Howard County, in elementary schools. And one of the newer initiatives—newish initiatives—that they instituted when I was a teacher there was, you know, how can we improve student behavior? Well, what if we do positive reinforcement? What if every time a student is doing what they’re supposed to be doing—you know, sitting quietly or standing in line and being silent—that we reward them with a ticket? A small

little ticket. And if they accumulate enough of these tickets, then they can purchase, you know, pencils and pens and other school supplies and things like that.

Now, I know some of you as I say this—this is a completely upsetting reality, because you grew up in a generation where, you know, that was just supposed to be what you were doing anyway, right? And you feel like, kind of almost jealous. “What, you get to get rewards just for sitting there and doing nothing? What? What’s going on?” But here’s the thing. Here’s the astonishing thing about this program. It was widely successful. Student behaviors and measures, like, increased dramatically. Why? Because as kids saw that they could be rewarded for just simply behaving, they did it. They wanted to do it.

But I could not help, as a teacher, feeling a little bit of remorse. Why? Because what I was teaching my students every single day was that the only way that you can be loved and be appreciated and be accepted was through your performance. I bemoan the fact that there were days as a teacher where there was a kid who was clearly, you know, there may be a million other things going on and reasons why they were struggling to behave in class that the kid did not even know about, and I could not tell this kid through this little ticket program, “You are still loved. You are still appreciated. I understand what you’re going through, and I understand why you would want to act in this way. And though it’s wrong, yes, you are still loved.” I couldn’t do it.

And I want to be careful, because I think that sometimes our surrounding culture tries to teach us that this kind of love is the economy in which we should treat one another. And I want to encourage you to think of it this way: what if this is the way that Christ treated his relationship with us? What if Christ looked at our estate and said, “All right, what can you offer me? What can you do for me?” I mean, can you imagine this? All right. So, I’m God. Jesus looks at us and says, “Well, I’m the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent Trinity filled with all wonder, majesty, wealth, and power. What have you got to give me?” And yet God’s disposition towards us is this constant, central love that shows us who he is. And more than that, it is a covering, Christ-like love.

And what does that mean? 1 Peter 4:8, if you look at the end of the verse, says, “Love covers a multitude of sins.” Now, without spending too much time trying to parse all of this out and what it means, I just want to clear the air of what this phrase is not trying to say. This phrase is not saying that in loving each other we have the power to atone for someone’s sins, nor does it say that we have the power to atone for our sins—that we somehow, like an economy, we negate our own personal sins the more that we love each other. Both these interpretations would go against the very heart of justification in Scripture, of God’s love for us.

But what Peter is leading us here to understand is that when we are able to pursue a central and constant love for the church and the community just as Christ has loved us, we are able to look past, to cover past a person’s sins in such a profound way that their transgressions against us seem insignificant, because our love for them makes it go away. Peter is not advocating here that because we sin, this frees us from the responsibility of not following Jesus’ commands. That’s not what it’s saying—that we should just enjoy being covered by loved and so, therefore, we can live whatever lifestyle we want to.

No, rather, Peter is reminding us here of that story that we just read, that Wayne so elegantly presented to us, about one of Peter’s last experiences with Jesus. He’s just returned as a fisherman in John 21, and he’s ashamed and embarrassed by what transpired in his denials of Christ. And as he’s looking into Jesus, he’s staring into the face of his greatest regret and his greatest failure. He’s staring into the reality that he wasn’t the man that he thought he was. He’s staring into the eyes of the risen Savior. You guys have to be wondering, what’s going on through Peter’s mind here? Maybe he’s asking himself the question, right, he’s like, “Why couldn’t I just do the right thing? Why did I fail to love Christ, who I committed myself to?”

And Jesus in this passage here shows us what it means when Peter says that love covers a multitude of sins. If you notice in the passage in John 21, he doesn’t even mention the denials that Peter

had made. He doesn't rehash the whole episode of him falling asleep while he told him to pray. He doesn't rehash the whole cutting off the ear of the priest thing. He doesn't do any of that. So Jesus in his wisdom and strength calls for Peter to ask him a simple question of, "Do you love me, Peter? Do you love me?" He asks him to state it three times for all three of Peter's denials, and then he tells Peter something profound. He says, "Go feed my sheep. Tend and care for the people of God." That's what it means to cover love.

And here's what it's not, okay? Jesus isn't sweeping Peter's sins underneath the rug and pretending like it didn't happen. This isn't Jesus putting a band-aid over an open wound and calling it whole. It's Jesus, when he is asking him these three questions to Peter, and when he says "go feed my sheep," he is releasing Peter from all that guilt and burden he's felt. He's saying that, "What you have done to me is not a barrier for my love for you, or for your love for me. It doesn't exist anymore." This is Jesus saying to Peter, "You know what? When you feed my sheep, I want you to love as I have loved you, not as you have once loved."

So when Peter writes that love covers a multitude of sins, Peter's own life and experience tells him that there is a grounding for this covering love that is to be found. And when you look at the weight of your own life, too, and when you look at the sins that have been covered by family, by friends, by your husband or wife, by your children, by your parents—when you look at the weight in which you are excellently and brilliantly loved—and each and every single person in here is—how could we not extend that covering of love to those others in our lives? How can we not release people from their guilt and their shame, just as we have? That is the question that Peter wants us to consider here this morning.

So, yes, do as he loved. But, Lord willing, you don't have to finish that phrase with "not as I do." You can finish that phrase by saying, "Do as he loved, and hopefully, by the grace of God, and by displaying how I have been forgiven, do as I do as well. Not because I'm so great, but because Christ is so wonderful and powerful and great." This is love personified. This is the love of Christ that compels each and every single one of us here today. This is the transformative work of the Gospel in this journey that we're all on together as a church. And that is the love that binds us as a community forever.

So we have a very awesome way to express that right now. I'm going to pray for us and close up our time here together, and then what we do always after we hear God's Word—we're going to sing. And in spite of my light jesting about love songs in the beginning of the sermon, I want you to know that every time we sing these songs of love and praise to the Lord, it's a response. It's a response. It's an expression of love. And as we see and hear the church sing out together, their love encourages our love for the Savior. And so I pray that we can do that together. Let us, above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins, found in the love of Christ. Let's pray.

Father, I know that for many of us, love is so difficult, because of our past hurt, pain, scars, because of the ways that we've failed to love, our deep regret. Lord, we become stingy with our love. And Father, you remind us today that you are love—that through the cross, Lord, through your death and resurrection for us, through the covering of our sins, you humble us to renew our expressions of love towards each other, to give it away freely, and to love not because we can somehow get something out of it, but because simply you have displayed it to us. So, God, thank you so much for this time in the Word today. And we love because you, indeed, have first loved us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.