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Love is From God

1 John 4:7-17

Prayer: Father, I just again, I thank you for the grace that you have bestowed just by the fact that we are here, we still have the freedom to worship and we are grateful for that. We're grateful, Lord, for what you've given to us especially with the gift of your word, the gift of your Son. And Lord, this morning once again we're at that point in the service where we're about to unpack the gift of your word and so we pray for the presence of your Holy Spirit, we pray for the grace and insight alone that can give us the ability to make this of lasting value, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well we've been in 1 John now, we've had eighteen previous messages, this is going on our nineteenth, I believe and as you've probably gathered by now, John's letter contains lots and lots of zigzags. John moves very rapidly from one point to another but he always winds up coming back to love as the one point of supreme importance. And last week we opened up chapter four with John concentrating on the importance of doctrinal truth. John stated it

very clearly in verse 1 of chapter 4. He said: *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*

And we saw last week that the test was actually the confession that Jesus Christ was very God in the flesh and very God in the spirit, and that anyone who denies that is in essence a false prophet. And from that point in the first six verses of chapter 4, John zigzags back to love and he spends the rest of the chapter reiterating and re-expressing his importance. I'm going to read you the whole section, this is verses 7 to 17. He says: *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. 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. 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. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 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. 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.

Well if you follow all of that you're doing pretty good. John covers an incredible amount of territory in that paragraph. John basically is taking us on a tour of the love of God and he starts with love itself in verse 7, then he moves on to the love of God in verses 7 to 10 and then to the love of people in verses 11 to 12 and then to the love expressed by the Holy Spirit in 13 through 17. And he begins in verse 7 with a very simple declaration about where love first came from. He says: *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God. Love is from God. It's such a simple statement but it contains an incredibly profound truth. Everything that you can observe in this world that has any semblance to love can trace its roots right back to the God who is love. Just think about that for a second. Everything about love can be traced back to the one who created it, and that is the God of love. I mean love is such a natural part of our existence, we can't really imagine what life would be like without it. And love is a uniquely human quality; it stems from being made in God's image. And because we're made in God's image we have the capacity to*

understand that love is not so much what we feel but also it's what we do. And knowing what is right and what is wrong is something that only humans know internally because God has written it on our hearts. *Romans 2:15* tells us: *The work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness.* And understand, this work of the law, it doesn't extend to the natural world. And the love that God is speaking of here is unique to those who know Jesus as Lord and Savior. Again he says: *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.*

You don't expect animals to love one another and they don't. I mean they exist, animals exist in a world not defined by love but by power. Let me give you a rough picture of what that might look like though. For most of my life I've been an aquarist. Now that's somebody who collects and displays fishes. I've had all kinds of aquariums except for saltwater which is way too persnickety and it's far too expensive, although I give you, the results are gorgeous. But for many, many years I raised dozens of communities of fishes in communal aquariums. And the one thing that I notice through many, many different aquariums that I've had is that they represent the order and the beauty of nature on the one hand but on the other hand they demonstrate exactly what an absence of love might look like on a practical level. You see in a

normal aquarium the fish, they just swim aimlessly back and forth waiting for their next feeding. Everything appears balanced and healthy until one fish starts acting differently than the others. And it may start swimming erratically; it may move up and down in a pattern it hasn't normally moved in that way before, it may appear listless, at some point the other fish start noticing it. Now, if this was a human community in which love at some basic level is so much of a given that it's never even thought of as love and is typical human community, if someone started stumbling like that someone would say, "Are you okay?" And if the need was great enough, people would call ambulances, they'd do CPR, they'd do whatever's necessary even if they didn't know you from Adam, even if your community consisted of that few people who were in the same two aisles at Wal-Mart where you got sick. But that's not what happens in a community aquarium. You see, if you're unfortunate enough to be a fish who's not quite right, like I said, you get noticed. But what the other fish notice is weakness and they respond to that weakness by testing it. They start nipping at that particular fish and at first it's tentative, they want to see if the fish has the strength to nip back. And then if they decide that this fish is actually weak enough, the nipping becomes much more aggressive and more widespread until eventually the whole tank turns on the fish and kills it. And that's why the first thing you do with a fish that starts acting abnormally is you isolate it, you

isolate in the hopes that you can nurse it back to health and return it to the tank. You remove it from the other fish because you know in an environment devoid of anything remotely resembling love, the only thing that matters is power, and a sick fish is a powerless fish. And you most definitely know what's going to happen next.

And you know, people love aquariums in their homes because they're attractive and the tank itself appears so peaceful; it has this calming effect. Only the inhabitants of that tank know how vicious this community is. They completely accept it as normal. I've never seen a fish mourn the lovelessness in his aquarium or longing for a closer connection to his fellow fish. I mean what we consider vicious they consider natural. If you look at nature itself, you'll see this incredibly brilliant system of interlocking mutual dependence by virtually all other creatures to the benefit of all, but it's next to impossible to confuse what you see in the animal kingdom with love. I mean I know some people claim that dogs genuinely love their masters -- cats not so much, but I would argue that whatever it is you see in a dog mirrors a concept of love that could only come because these particular creatures have been close companions to the only creatures who even know what the idea of love is, and that is us. And the only reason we know of it is that we were created in the image of God who loves. John says:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God. And the natural man says, nonsense.

A materialist naturalist is a person who believes that human beings are just animals who are higher up on the evolutionary scale than fishes or dogs or cats. And they believe that a material world is all that there is and the only thing that is real is what you can see, taste, touch, hear, and feel, that is that material world that surrounds us. And all the rest are myths and fairy tales and stories because we've evolved from nothing by chance, and that belief makes up a huge percentage of people today. And now these folks who don't believe in God, they're wise enough to know that something that looks like love is unique to human beings. And the way they see it is that this idea of love is actually an evolutionary category of altruistic behavior that developed as a means of keeping the species going. You see the thinking goes like this. As human beings are these highly evolved animals and as these highly evolved animals, we realize that collective cooperation with some degree of collective sacrifice would enable the species to survive far better than it would if everybody decided they would pursue their own desires exclusively. And love according to this view is actually nothing but a neurological response that evolved from a need for self-protection. We had evolved enough intelligence to realize that the amount of energy

spent individually in, say, protecting myself from getting murdered, well, could be better spent in collectively preventing murders in general. So we began to evolve altruistic behaviors as a means of protecting ourselves from ourselves because we're really no different than fish in an aquarium. We don't murder because of some moral identity within us that tells us that murder is wrong but because of a collective social agreement that serves all of us who don't want to be murdered individually. We simply decide as a species that it's better to collectively say murder is a bad thing so that I won't get murdered. And if we get everyone generally to agree to that, that it's simply best for the species and not necessarily a moral judgment because there are no moral judgments, just collective decisions that enhances species' chances of survival. Well we believers say in response to that, that love, as John puts it, is uniquely of God because it emanates from God. They say no, no, no, no, love is simply an altruistic response that enhances the survival of a species and the species is all that matters because after life, according to this belief, comes absolutely nothing. You just become fertilizer for the next round of life. Love is just an evolved neurological response that allows the cycle to continue. So John begs to differ.

He goes on to describe this force called love as a unique force, something that emanates from God alone. And the power to express

God's love only comes to those who know God and who are born again of God. Again to repeat, he says: *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.* And then he begins to expound on this love of God expressed toward his creatures. In verse 9 he says: *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.*

So John then sets out to further refine not just any example but the finest example there ever was of just what love would look like. Verse 10 he says: *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.* And if you remember this is not the first time John has used this theological term. If you remember way back in chapter 2 John said of Jesus in *1 John 2:2: He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.* I said back then, I defined the Gospel Coalition defines propitiation as -- quote -- "Averting the wrath of God by the offering of a gift." It refers to the turning away of the wrath of God as the just judgment of our sin by God's own provision of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

I pointed out that many of us have had a problem with that word

"wrath." I mean we associate that word with anger, with frustration, maybe even rage. And with God wrath is always associated not with anger but with justice. You see, wrath is God's response, his holiness response to unholiness. And since God is perfect in all of his attributes, perfect justice demands perfect wrath against sin. And from God's perspective, his holiness demands that he balance his mercy with justice. And again at that point many people object and say, hey, God's all powerful. He can simply elect to forgive us unconditionally without making any reference to wrath. But God has told us that his universe is organized around both mercy and justice. And for God to be all mercy would be for God to ignore justice; for God to be all justice would be for God to ignore mercy and compassion. And both extremes represent a God who is less than perfect. Propitiation represents God's public display of his commitment to both. And John is telling us the Son of God gave up his equality with the Father to take on human flesh so that he could offer up his perfect life as a propitiation, not to the devil as if the devil was owed it, but to his own in the Trinity sense of justice, holiness and righteousness. Jesus offered himself up as the perfect sacrifice to satisfy his own perfect justice. And he did that knowing that we couldn't, knowing that we by faith could make Jesus our Lord and then inherit his righteousness as our own.

And that word propitiation goes a long way in distinguishing John's understanding of God's love and the world's understanding of love as simply a neurological response. It's the difference between the force that governs the animal world and the power that God gives uniquely to his children. And that difference goes back to the difference between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. You see, the kingdom of light is organized around the power of love, and the kingdom of darkness is organized around the power of power itself. You might think the kingdom of darkness would be organized around the opposite of the kingdom of light, that one kingdom would represent love, well then the other one would represent hate. But the kingdom of darkness sees hatred only as a means to an end. And understand, the end that it seeks is power.

If you recall the initial confrontation that Jesus had with Satan in the desert, three times Satan tempted Jesus and each of those times it wasn't a temptation for him to hate, rather it was a temptation for Jesus to use power to achieve his ends. Because to the enemy, power is all that matters. I mean after fasting for forty days, Satan tries to tempt Jesus to use his power to create bread from stones. It says: *"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."* And when Jesus refuses, the devil next tempts Jesus to use his power over gravity itself by

saying: *"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "'He will command his angels concerning you,' and "'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"* And when that fails Satan offers Jesus all the power of all the kingdoms for all time in all the world if Jesus would simply give his power to Satan. It says: *And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory -- that's power -- for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."* And Jesus answered him, *"It is written, "'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'"*

You see, the temptation in the desert was really the opening salvo in the battle between Jesus and Satan and the weapons that were used repeatedly was the power of love versus the power of power itself. This is what John is highlighting in our text this morning. It's the difference between the power that Jesus represents and the power that Satan represents and it's the difference that's really at the heart of the war in heaven. I mean you've heard me say it over and over again, that we are a kingdom at war. And I've repeated that the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness have been locked in this battle ever since the garden of Eden and actually before that when Satan rebelled in

heaven itself. But one of the things that John is actually pointing out here is that the weapon that God uses, his weapon in this battle of the ages is completely unique. The weapon that God chose to defeat Satan with is not power, it's not strength, it's not the ability to conquer, it is in fact the ability to love. And in the end the cross is all about God demonstrating the superior power of love over any other power. And what is unique about power and love is that they are antithetical. They're like light and darkness, you can't have them both together. The more you have of one, the less you're going to have of the other. The love that John is speaking of, the love of God represents God himself giving up power in order to demonstrate love, and that's something that John wants to see mirrored perfectly in Jesus so that we can understand God's desire to see it mirrored in us. And John puts it this way, he says: *Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

Okay. So how is it that God loved us? How did God perfectly demonstrate a willingness to forego power to pursue love? Well, we need look no further than *Philippians 2:3* which lays out exactly how he did it. This is what God says. He says: *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind*

among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. You see, selfish ambition and conceit, they're all about power. They're all about gathering it for myself, expressing it among others. And humility itself eschews power by counting others more significant than myself.

The most important, the most significant person in the universe is the Lord Jesus Christ. As the creator and sustainer of the universe, he's the source of all of its significance, I mean, without him, none of us would have our being. And so regardless the honor or dishonor he's received here on earth, we know that the universe and the heaven that he's actually from is a place where his significance is continually acknowledged, worshiped and understood. And we also know that he left that place and that position of supreme power to enter into an existence not like Solomon or Nebuchadnezzar did as kings who commanded the attention of the entire known world at the time and all the power that that included but as a completely insignificant peasant, one who not only gave up any hint of political power, but he went even further, he gave up even the power that an attractive persona always

provides. I have a hard time wrapping my head around the fact that Jesus was physically unattractive, but that's what the scripture declares. My guess is that he wasn't particularly ugly but that his personal appearance was completely and utterly forgettable. This is what Isaiah tells us in *Isaiah 53:2*, it says: *He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.* See, Jesus wanted no part of any accoutrement of power including being physically attractive. I mean understand Jesus is literally the author of every physical body that's ever been created and yet he chose a completely nondescript, utterly forgettable physical tabernacle to dwell in. I mean, just wonder could you go any farther in counting yourself more insignificant than others? Well, Paul says: *Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

And so we ask, okay, what are the interests of the creator of the universe? Well, according to scripture it's glory and honor and power and worship. *Revelation 4:11* says: *"Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."*

All right then, what are the interests of others that he took up? Well we know that the creator of the planets took up an interest in carpentry, that he learned it from his stepfather. I mean he

reduced the power to create universes down to the power to make a table or a plow handle the hard way, by carving it out of solid wood. And we can also surmise that the one who created the seas and all of the creatures that inhabit them, the one who commanded schools of fish to appear at will, who commanded an individual fish to swallow a prophet whole or just show up with a coin in his mouth so Peter could pay his taxes, that he would probably ask someone like Peter or John to show him first how to become a fisher of fish so that he could teach his disciples how to become fishers of men. I'd say Jesus did a pretty good job of not looking to his own interests but the interests of others. And in each case Jesus had to unload or truncate or diminish his extraordinary power in order to exhibit and display his extraordinary love. But those were just minor displays compared to letting go of his equality with the Father and the Holy Spirit -- quote -- *emptying himself taking the form of a servant*.

I pointed out that the very act of incarnating oneself brought the greatest transformation of power downward that has ever taken place. Think about it. The most powerful person in the universe assumed human flesh in the most powerless and vulnerable form he could ever possibly take. I mean, we're in the midst of a national convulsion centered around the Supreme Court's possible overturning the Roe versus Wade. We hope and we pray for just that. But among

the hysterical responses to the idea of abortion being made illegal is the statement that it's nothing but a clump of cells. As if to say that when life is powerless, it's of no value whatsoever.

Jesus went further back than even that. He went back to a human egg in the life force from the Holy Spirit itself, they multiplied into a zygote clinging to a womb of a peasant girl in Israel. God reduced himself to just a clump of cells on our behalf. Nine months later that clump of cells had grown into a baby born in Bethlehem being born in the likeness of men. The King and the Creator of the universe is now so powerless he can't even lift his head or articulate a single word, he can only cry like all babies do. And that baby went on to live a flawless obscure existence until age thirty when he began his public ministry. He did that by pouring himself into the lives of twelve other men. He then spent the next three years of his public life doing good to all men while being insulted, abused, lied about, betrayed and abandoned. Well his mission ended three years later on a cross outside of Jerusalem. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. You see, the cross is God's answer as to why a good God can be in charge of such a painful earth. John says: *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.*

I recently had a conversation with someone who was basically talking about this, saying there's so much pain, so much cruelty in the world, I couldn't possibly believe that there's a good God who's in charge of it. He didn't realize but he was making a logically incoherent statement. You see, you can't say anything is good or bad for humanity unless you have some kind of standard outside of humanity by which to judge it. If there's no power greater than the power of blind evolution that produced us, then there's no power good enough to say what is objectively wrong and objectively right including deciding whether or not God is evil. If there's no God then everything comes down to a matter of personal opinion. I mean, you may think rape and murder are awful while someone might say the opposite. You have no way of distinguishing which opinion is correct. I mean, Nazi Germany thought rape and murder was perfectly fine for Jews. In fact it was a moral good, it was something necessary on their way to creating a master race. If you were a materialist naturalist, the most you could say is you didn't like it or that it offended you, but you could never logically say that it was good or evil because those categories would not exist. And you'd certainly have no basis to decide whether God is good or evil because there'd be no God in the first place. And so I told my friend the only answer that a Christian God gives to any and everything in this world is the cross, and the cross is as good an answer as anyone will ever

receive. I told him every single religion in the world attempts to answer that very question, why is there so much suffering in the world but only one religion answers that question with a question, and the question is: Why did God himself suffer? No other religion even remotely attempts to wrestle with evil by saying: *He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* Buddhism and Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, all the other religions attempt to find a way to work your way up to God. Christianity alone says that God is willing to work his way down to us, not just to the level of a king or potentate, not just to the level of a servant but to a servant humbled by becoming obedient to the point of death.

I mean there's a reason why Jesus' initial confrontation with Satan in the desert was all about power. It's because God knew that the ultimate confrontation that would take place between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness would be a contest between the power of love and the power of power itself. Just think of the advantages that power itself has. Think of the advantages that Satan had, he could lie, he could cheat, he could murder, he could deceive, in fact he used every one of those tools thinking that it would be more than enough to defeat the power of love itself. And he was up against an opponent in Jesus Christ who had far more power than Satan has ever had. I mean, think about it, Christ

created Satan. He was the greatest of the angels before he rebelled, and yet all of that power Christ was willing to forego in order to prove that the greatest power there is is love. And the way to access that power is by giving up your own power. And that's why John says: *Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

Well let me repeat what John is saying practically speaking through Paul's words. Again Paul says: *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. John goes on to say: No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.*

You know, if I want to know how real my relationship with Christ is, if I want to know if the Spirit of Christ is truly dwelling within me, I ask myself some questions: How do I respond to power and weakness? How accomplished am I at taking the form of a servant? How do I react when I'm treated like a servant? See, the enemy would love this world to be one giant aquarium where everything looks pretty and calm and peaceful and yet everyone

knows deep down that it's all about power. That's right where our culture is today. As soon as you slip, as soon as you step out of line, as soon as you lose your power, you will be devoured. We even have a name for it, we call it "cancel culture." It's just a big version of my aquarium.

Paul came from a place that worshiped power and God brought him to the place where he finally understood the antithetical nature of love and power. And when he cried out to God to remove the thorn he had been given, God said, "No." Then God said: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

That power is the power of love. It took a lot of time, it took a lot of heartache but finally Paul understood exactly what God was after, and this is how Paul responded, he said: *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.* Folks, that power is the exact opposite of the power of power. It is the power of love, and the only way you can understand and apply it is by understanding the weakness that chooses servanthood over Lordship. Paul went on to say: *For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

John finishes up the chapter by summing it up in verse 14. He

says: And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. He's our example. He is who we imitate. In verse 15 he says: Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. That God is the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is our strength, our source, our power from within, and then in verse 16 he says: 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. And what he's saying is he's our testimony in our life as we move from living for the power of power to the power of love, we see worked out in our own lives that our strength is made perfect in weakness. And we grow in our ability to be confident not in ourselves but in the strength that God alone can give. Verse 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. Let's pray.

Father, I just, I thank you, we will spend all of eternity unpacking what it is you've done for us. We can't even begin to scratch the surface of what you did, giving up the incredible power that you had in order to embrace the power of love. Lord, I just continue to pray that you would give us the vision of what that means, that the actual strength and power that lies within us always finds its source in our weakness, always finds its source in

our dependence on you. Give us the ability, Lord, to trust in that, to trust in you when you send that weakness our way, and I pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.