

Sermon 38, The Love of God Manifested, 1 John 4:9-10

Proposition: The coming of Christ shows what love really is.

- I. God's Love Measures and Defines Love, v. 10a
 - A. Our Love Is not the Measure of Love, v. 10a
 - B. Christianity Is not Moralism, v. 10a
- II. God's Love Described, vv. 9-10
 - A. He Loved Us, v. 9a
 - B. He Sent His Only Son, v. 9a
 - C. He Sent His Son so We Could Live through Him, v. 9b
 - D. He Sent His Son as a Wrath-Removing Sacrifice, v. 10b

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the coming of the Son of God into the world shows us what love really is. God is love, as we saw last week. From His being, His actions flow. From His being, which is love, flow His acts of love. Indeed, it is because of those loving actions that we can know and believe that He is love. The coming of Jesus Christ into the world shows us what love really is. Let's look at that reality together more closely.

I. God's Love Measures and Defines Love, v. 10a

The first thing to notice here is that John gives us a bold and surprising negative. This is *not* love, he tells us. Rather like Proverbs, which says much about the fool in order to educate us in wisdom, 1 John tells us what love is not in order to get into our heads what it is. Yet, though it's important to understand what love is not, surely we would expect something along the lines of what we saw in the previous chapter: Love is not closing your heart to a brother who's in need. Love is not a failure to care. Oh no. Love is a passionate attachment, a hearty feeling of care and delight — right? But, my friends, that is exactly what it is not.

A. Our Love Is not the Measure of Love, v. 10a

You see, the love John attacks, the love he negates, is the love that you and I have in our hearts. This is not love! What? These words are so familiar to us that we miss their shocking assertion: Whatever is going on in your heart towards God, it isn't love. This is not love: Whatever you're doing toward the Almighty. Your warm fuzzy feelings about God don't count. Your hours in prayer don't count. Your days spent in worship don't count. Your Bible reading and your Christ-centered home and your Christian education expensively purchased for your children — none of these things count. They aren't love.

Well, then, John, if you're going to be so insulting, what are they? Do I do all these things because I hate God? Do I pursue godliness in every area of my life and my family's life because I don't care about God? What are you trying to say?

Well, of course, what John is trying to say is not that you don't love God at all. What he's saying is that God is easy to love. It hardly counts to love Him. He is lovable! He is perfectly attractive, perfectly beautiful, perfectly delightful. When we predicate these things of Him, we must remove the element of cutesiness which they imply. But, that cutesiness removed, the fundamental reality is that God is perfectly glorious and desirable. Your love for Him is simply too easy. Brothers and sisters, I'm glad you do all the things you do because you love God. I'm glad you love Him in all those ways. John is too. He's thrilled that you love God. But he's trying to get across to you the point that to love God, though it is the greatest commandment, is not the greatest demonstration of what love is. As we will see in the rest of the passage, to love sinners is in one sense a greater thing than to love God. To love the disgusting, evil, and unlovely is a more powerful love, a love more worthy of the name, than the most passionate attachment to God and His ways and work. We'll talk about that more in a moment, and in the weeks to come.

B. Christianity Is not Moralism, v. 10a

But before we leave this statement that "This is not love: Your and my love for God," I want to make one more observation. Christianity is indeed about loving God. That is the most important commandment. Jesus died to enable us to love God. But Christianity is not ultimately predicated on our love for God. The Christian message is about God's love for us, as expressed in the gift of His Son.

Moralism is all about what we do. It is the proclamation that we must be good and do good. Many non-Christians are under the impression that Christianity largely consists of systematically thinking that one is better than other people. But John blasts all that out of the water. How we feel about God is not love. What we do for God is not love. The love that is the greatest of these, greater even than faith and hope, is not the core of our proclamation or our hope. John devalues what we do, the love with which we love God, precisely in order to magnify the love with which God loves us. That, brothers and sisters, is the Christian message — not that we loved Him, but that He loved us. The good news that you share when you evangelize is not "I love God." Yes, that's good news — but for the people you're talking to, it's not nearly so good as the news that God loves us.

So don't you dare give the impression to others that the best thing about the Christian faith is you and how wonderful your love for God is. Yes, it truly is wonderful that you love God. But comparatively speaking, that's a pretty simple achievement. What people really want to know is whether God could possibly love them. The answer is yes. He has loved the world; that is the message here. And He loved it in a particular way. That way is the way of Christ. God loved the world by sending His Son to be the wrath-removing sacrifice for our sins.

II. God's Love Described, vv. 9-10

And so, in addition to telling us what love is not, John highlights what love *does* consist in. I want to highlight first of all its object.

A. He Loved Us, v. 9a

That object is us — wretched sinners. God’s love was manifested toward us. He showed His love to us. He didn’t hide it from us, didn’t keep it in reserve for Himself, didn’t show it primarily to angels or to plants, but to us. The kind of love that John is talking about here was shown first and foremost to human beings.

What does that tell us? “Smile, God loves you,” the bumper sticker says. But, more importantly perhaps, it tells us to love one another. God’s love is a personal love directed toward persons, a divine love directed toward humans. And this tells us as well where our love should go. Carraba’s Italian Grill was one of my parents’ favorite restaurants. The Ft. Collins location, at least, prominently featured the Italian phrase “There is no love more sincere than the love of food.” That phrase always captured my attention. If it’s true, Heaven help us all. God’s love is a love manifested toward human beings. Is yours? Do you love this album and that book and this artist and those colors and those flowers? If I listened to you talk about what you favor and enjoy, would I hear references to people or to things? There’s nothing wrong with loving music, food, and plants. But God’s love went down a better path. God’s love is shown to us. And if your love isn’t shown to one another, brothers and sisters, I have to conclude that you don’t know the love of God. God loves people. If you don’t, you are not His child.

B. He Sent His Only Son, v. 9a

But here’s the other thing: The love of God is specific. That is, it took expression in one particular way. We make all kinds of unwarranted assumptions about what a loving God would and would not do. Lots of people have asserted and continue to assert that a loving God wouldn’t send people to Hell, that He wouldn’t kill His own Son on a cross, that He wouldn’t judge homosexual activity, and on and on and on. Many of us believe that a loving God is not really bothered by our particular peccadilloes, and that no matter how much the world’s sin offends Him the sins of conservative Christians like ourselves are more or less irrelevant to Him. He shrugs them off just as we move past our child’s moment of yelling at another child who did something that was obviously out of line anyway.

But John takes all that tissue of assumptions and torches it with oxyacetylene. Do you want to know how God shows His nature as love? It’s simple. He showed it by sending His Son into the world. The sending of the Son to be one of us is the ultimate expression of God’s love. He does not express His love by taking every human being to Heaven; He does not express His love by telling us that our sins are no big deal. He expresses His love by having sent His Son.

C. He Sent His Son so We Could Live through Him, v. 9b

But it gets even more specific than that. The very presence of the Son of God in the world is not the goal here. The Son came for a particular reason. That reason was so that we could live through Him. In other words, the sending of the Son presupposes that we were dead. Had He not come, we could not have had life. Had He stayed away, we would have remained spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins in which we once walked.

Brothers and sisters, you don't live without Christ. A Christless life is no life at all. Life means knowing God and His Son. They are the source of life, and to be cut off from them is to be cut off from life.

This is why we come to church: Here we meet our life-giving Savior.

To live through Christ is not to vicariously have Him do all the things we wanted to do but couldn't. You hear about that sometimes — parents who are living through their children. But in reality, to live through Christ is to come to spiritual life by means of His work. It means to live as a result of what Jesus did. Your physical life is from your parents. You live through them. Behind them and before them, your physical life is from Jesus Christ, the creator of the world. And thanks to His work in living the perfect life and dying the perfect death, you have spiritual life too.

D. He Sent His Son as a Wrath-Removing Sacrifice, v. 10b

Why? Because God sent His Son to take away our sins. God was angry about sins and determined to punish them. If He didn't punish them, then He would be endorsing them. But in order to make a way for His even greater love to reach us, He punished His Son for our sins. The Son absorbed every last drop of God's wrath.

Brothers and sisters, that's love. God sent His Son to remove His wrath and bring us to life — first spiritual life, but ultimately physical life as it was meant to be at the resurrection of our bodies.

So don't make of God's love a wax nose that can be twisted any way you like. It's not. God's love took very specific form, and that form is the classic Christian proclamation that Jesus died in order to take God's wrath so that you and I wouldn't have to. God loves you. How do you know? Because Jesus of Nazareth lived and died and rose again. That is how God loved you. That is the measure of love.

We began this sermon by noting that our love for God is too easy. It's too low a standard. Real love does something far greater than that. It loves and gives to the wicked, the worthless, the undeserving. That's God's love. And it has come to you today in Jesus Christ. So can't you love one another? Amen.