

Series: 1 John

Title: Love like God

Text: 1 John 4:7-10

Date: May 30, 2021

Verse 7

In verse 7, John returned to one of his favorite subjects — love. He said, “Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7). The title “dear friends” was based on a translation of one Greek word in the text — the word *agapētós*. It was a favorite term of John in his letter. He used it in 1 John 2:7, 3:2, and 4:1. The word has often been rendered “beloved.” It was used in reference to God’s people, depicting the family-like love that existed amongst the body of Christ.

John was intentional in using the term. Since the first-century churches of Asia Minor had been infiltrated by many non-Christian false teachers, John used it as a term of address when he meant to speak directly to the real Christians among his audience. As it appeared in our text, the word was a sign post. It was intended to reveal that the words that followed were meant for born-again believers.

John wanted the regenerate to “love one another.” His instruction was an echo of an exhortation he had given previously in his letter. In 1 John 3:18, he said, “Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth.” Later he would say, “Now this is his command: that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another as he commanded us” (1 John 3:23). John dwelt relentlessly on the need for love in the Christian life. His teaching was necessary, since many in Asia Minor were engaging in hateful lifestyles (1 John 2:7-11). All in all, John’s teaching was rooted and grounded in the doctrine of Christ. In his gospel account, he recorded the way in which Jesus said, “I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

Verse 8

In verse 8, John stated the inverse of his conclusion from verse 7. If those who loved were born of God, it stood to reason that those who didn’t love were not born of God. John said, “The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8). The apostle’s words may have seemed harsh, but they were much needed. The Gnostics were attempting to pass themselves off as true Christians. Among God’s people, there was a need for discernment. No matter how many boasts the heretics made concerning advanced knowledge and perfectionism, they were lacking in one of the most fundamental aspects of God’s nature — love.

By their fruits (Matthew 7:20), the false teachers gave evidence that they didn’t really know God. Those who had a rudimentary understanding of God’s character knew that he was a God of love. Moses had said, “The Lord your God is a compassionate God” (Deuteronomy 4:31). John consistently highlighted the loving nature of the Lord in his writings (1 John 3:1, 4:16, 4:19). He did so because many were failing to embody love. In our current verse, he said, “God is love.” The apostle did not mean to say that love was God, nor did he mean to elevate love as the only divine attribute of significance. Instead, he wanted his readers to remember that love was a primary part of God’s nature.

He wanted to show the contradiction of the religious professions of some in Asia Minor. It is impossible for one to truly know God and not demonstrate a degree of love. Calvin has said, “There is no knowledge of God where there is no love...when any one separates faith from love, it is the same as though he attempted to take away heat from the sun.”¹ It is for this

¹ Calvin, 238.

reason that John felt he had liberty to call into question the salvation of the false teachers. Their unloving lifestyles made their religious claims suspect (1 John 2:15, 3:10, 3:14, and 4:21).

Verse 9

To prove that love was an integral part of God's character, John said, "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his one and only Son into the world so that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9). If one doubted whether or not God was love, he or she only needed to think of Jesus. The Lord's condescension into human form (Philippians 2:5-7) and willingness to suffer for sin (Galatians 2:20) was evidence that He had a fervent love toward humanity. The cross formed the logic of love. Jesus Himself said, "No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). The mouths of the prattling braggarts in Asia Minor should have stopped at the mention of Calvary. Christ's death called the church to love.

John plunged into the depths of the Father's love for humanity by speaking of Jesus as the "one and only Son" of God. The Greek New Testament used the word *monogenēs*. The term was a compound one that strictly meant "only offspring." It spoke of one who was a unique or one of a kind child. The author of Hebrews also used such terminology to speak of the way in which Isaac was Abraham's special and unique son (Hebrews 11:17). Jesus was one of a kind in that He was the only God-man. John spoke of Jesus in such terms on a regular basis (John 1:14, 1:18, 3:16, 3:18). The fact that God sent His unique Son to die for sin magnified the depth of His love for us.

Verse 10

John extended his argument concerning the love of the Lord by saying, "Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice" (1 John 4:10). The apostle's words were intended to convey the idea that all love begins with God. Any love one has in his heart, and any love one exhibits in her life, has nothing to do with human goodness. Calvin has commented, "We are born so corrupt and depraved, that there is in us as it were an innate hatred to God, so that we desire nothing but what is displeasing to him, so that all the passions of our flesh carry on continual war with his righteousness."²

A Christian is only able to love because of God's love towards the church. Left to self, humanity is completely selfish and sinful, incapable of loving. The power to love comes from God's gracious display of love toward mankind. When writing about his Christian experience, Paul said, "For I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do what is good is with me, but there is no ability to do it" (Romans 7:18). John wanted his readers to nurture a perspective similar to the one Paul had. The ability to love like God only came from the gospel and grace of God.

Despite our total depravity, love is possible through the cross. That's why John spoke of the way in which God "sent his Son" on our behalf. Christ is the Christian's means of both developing and displaying the love of God. Our Lord was the perfect embodiment of God's love (John 11:35-36). His death and resurrection rendered sin and Satan powerless over our lives (Romans 6:3-4 and 7:24-25). His Spirit within the soul of a believer provides divine enablement to love as He loved (Romans 5:5 and Galatians 5:22). Neither human resolutions or efforts can produce the charity of Christ. To love, one must learn to abide in Christ and draw from Holy Spirit power.

John emphasized the role of the cross in producing love in the life of the believer by speaking of the way in which Jesus was "the atoning sacrifice" for sin. The Greek word in the text was the word *hilasomós*. It only appeared twice in the New Testament. Both appearances of the word were in John's first letter, 1 John 2:2 being the only other reference. The word meant "to propitiate" or "to expiate." The idea was of one paying the necessary price for the

² Calvin, 240.

removal of a penalty.³ Used spiritually and religiously, the term spoke of one paying the price sin requires. It was used in the Septuagint to speak of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 25:9). In God's economy, propitiation, is the taking away of the enmity between God and man that existed because of sin.

Atonement for sin may seem completely unrelated to love between believers within a local church. John, however, wanted his readers to see the correlation between Christ's substitutionary work and believers' responsibility to love. Though they were once enemies with God because of their sin (Ephesians 2:1-3), God provided a way for them to be redeemed and restored (Ephesians 2:4-5). In light of such sacrificial love, how could any within the assembly excuse their lack of love?

³ Zodhiates, 769-771.