

Series: 1 John
Title: What is Love
Text: 1 John 4:11-16a
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Verse 11

In verse 11, John once again reminded his readers of the Christian imperative regarding love. He said, “Dear friends, if God loved us in this way, we also must love one another” (1 John 4:11). The term of address at the outset of the verse was also used back in verses 1 and 7. It was a moniker frequently used of Christians, depicting the close companionship believers enjoyed in the Lord. From the teaching of Jesus Himself, the early church understood they had a family-like love in Christ (Mark 3:33 and 35).

By the cross and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, believers are united in heart and soul (Ephesians 2:19-20). They enjoy a kindred connection that is more meaningful than natural, family relations (Proverbs 27:10). John appealed to such realities in order to encourage the churches in Asia Minor to embrace Christian charity.

The phrase translated “loved us in this way” contained language identical to that found in John 3:16.¹ John meant to convey the manner in which God loved the church. The language depicted “the manifestation of God’s love both in its manner and in its extent.”² John held up the Lord’s love as a model for the way in which believers were to love. One has said, “nothing less than God’s love in Christ is the model for the love Christian should have toward one another.”³ Believers are to strive to love others sacrificially and unconditionally as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25-28).

The word translated “must” was a word that depicted divine necessity. One has said it meant “to be morally obligated, to pay a debt that must be paid.”⁴ It was previously used in 1 John 2:6 to speak of the Christian requirement regarding love.⁵ As used by John, the Greek term inferred that “there is an inner-motivation and obligation to love others... This obligation or debt cannot be postponed for any reason. It is one we rightly owe.”⁶ The original language of the text used a present tense verb, indicating an ongoing obligation.⁷ John meant to convey the idea that God didn’t just model love for us. God also mandated it. Christ’s love was not just a pattern to be followed. It was a precept to be obeyed. One has said, “God’s love serves not only as a sufficient example but as a stimulating cause. Our love should flow naturally from God’s love which we have experienced.”⁸

The phrase translated “love one another” also appeared also in 1 John 2:7, 3:11, and 4:7.⁹ John’s teaching was based on Jesus’ teaching. The apostle made a clear reference to the Lord’s Great Commandment. In John 13:34, our Lord said, “I give you a new command:

¹ Ross, 204.

² Robertson, 233.

³ Walvoord and Zuck, [CD-Rom].

⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 598.

⁵ Robertson, 233.

⁶ Akin, 181.

⁷ Akin, 181.

⁸ Beacon, 391.

⁹ Ross, 204.

Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another.” On another occasion, he said, “This is my command: Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Jesus made love a priority. He regarded it as the most important of His teachings. Consequently, John’s readers were under obligation to pursue love.

Verse 12

John spoke of the nature of God in verse 12. He did so in order to provide his readers with transformational theological truth. He said, “No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God remains in us and his love is made complete in us” (1 John 4:12). John’s reference to the fact that “no one has ever seen God” may seem like a diversion from his discussion concerning love. However, it was of utmost importance to the situation at hand. The Gnostics were making boasts concerning personal revelations from the Lord. They claimed they had seen things from the heavenly realm (Colossians 2:18). John refuted their claims, reminding his readers that he and the apostles were the ones who had received personal revelation from the Lord. In seeing Christ (1 John 1:1), the apostles learned that love was a defining virtue of the Lord and all who follow Him. Such a rebuttal was needed, considering the actions of the hate-filled heretics in Asia Minor.

The concept that “No one has ever seen God” is one that is repeated in Scripture (1 Timothy 6:16). It is important to note that John’s words were not intended to be taken as a denial that anyone can see God at all. He himself previously confessed that he had seen God (1 John 1:1). In the book of Revelation, he would give witness of seeing the presence of God in heaven (Revelation 4:2-3). What was the meaning of the apostle’s words in our verse?

Perhaps it would help to consider the meaning of the original language. The word translated “seen” was one that referred to “careful observation or close scrutiny.”¹⁰ It was the word from which we get our word “theater.”¹¹ As used in our current verse, it appeared in the middle voice, depicting an action one performed upon him or herself.¹² John’s point was that “no man has seen God in his unveiled essence, glory, and majesty.”¹³ It seems there is a part of God’s glorious nature that remains unseen and unknowable to human perception.

John wanted his readers to know that no one had fully seen God’s glory. Such a reminder was important, considering the boasts of the Gnostics. They made claims of having received personal revelations from the Lord. Considering the unloving ways of such individuals (1 John 2:9), it was unlikely they had actually “seen” God. John stated the same point in a different way in 1 John 4:8.

Though none can fully see God, God can be seen through the life of his children when they love on another. John spoke of this reality in verse 12 when he said “If we love one another, God remains in us.” Once again, John meant to provide a confirming mark of true salvation. The unloving “Christians” in Asia minor were not genuine believers. Their hateful lifestyles made their religious professions useless. Love was the clear evidence that “God remains” in an individual.

John’s words were based on the doctrine of regeneration. When one is born again (John 3:3), the Spirit of God comes to reside within that person’s soul (Galatians 3:2 and 1 Corinthians 6:19). The indwelling presence of the Spirit produces a change (2 Corinthians 5:17). The born-again believer receives the will and power to love like God (Romans 5:5 and Galatians 5:22). The unloving Gnostics gave evidence that they were not really children of God.

¹⁰ Akin, 181.

¹¹ Akin, 181.

¹² Robertson, 233.

¹³ Akin, 181-182.

John further explained the role of Christian love in Christian discipleship by saying “and his love is made complete in us.” The word translated “and” could have been rendered “because.”¹⁴ It showed the inevitable outworking of Christian love in the disciple’s life.

The word translated “complete” has caused much confusion. It spoke of a degree of perfection.¹⁵ Contrary to the opinion of some, John did not espouse a form of sinless perfectionism. He had already denied the possibility of such a reality earlier in his letter (1 John 1:8-10).

John’s intent was to promote a maturation in love amongst his readers. The word translated “complete” alluded to advancements in Christian sanctification. It was often used to speak of one bringing something to its logical conclusion or goal.¹⁶ The word depicted one working to eliminate inadequacies in his or her life.¹⁷ The word was used to speak of Christian maturity in love back in 1 John 2:5. In the original language of our current verse, the verb appeared as a perfect passive indicative verb; thus, it portrayed an action that God performed upon a believer.¹⁸ One has said “The meaning in this last clause... is that our love for the brethren is brought to its most complete expression.”¹⁹ The apostle meant to say that true Christians display a measure of complete love. True Christians are continually growing and maturing in love.

Though “no one has ever seen God,” God’s presence could be seen in the lives of believers, so long as they grew and matured in love. The verbiage of our verse contained a present subjunctive. As a result, it portrayed a condition that could bring about a continual action. The idea was, “we keep on loving one another.”²⁰ John meant to say that the continual manifestation of love in the lives of believers would give a brilliant testimony of Christ to others. When believers mature in love, Christ’s love will be visible to a lost world (John 13:35).

Verse 13

In verse 13, John once again presented love as a proof of true conversion. He said, “This is how we know that we remain in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit” (1 John 4:13). The word translated “know” was a famous one amongst the heretics. It was a technical term used to speak of their supposed special insight. John used the Gnostics’ term against them, maintaining that true knowledge came through the presence of the Holy Spirit in one’s life. Religious boasts and claims of special knowledge were null and void apart from such realities. The Spirit of God “testifies together with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Romans 8:16).

John’s reference to the “Spirit” was intended to provide assurance of salvation, but it was also intended to promote the way in which the Holy Spirit empowers Christians to love. The original language was strong. It literally read, “He has given us out of his spirit.” It strongly conveyed the idea of participation with the Holy Spirit. John previously spoke of the Spirit’s indwelling presence and power in 1 John 3:24.²¹

¹⁴ Calvin, 243.

¹⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 598.

¹⁶ Akin, 182.

¹⁷ Akin, 182.

¹⁸ Robertson, 233.

¹⁹ Beacon, 393.

²⁰ Robertson, 233.

²¹ Ross, 204.

The phrase “He has given” was perfective. It depicted a “completed action with continuing results.”²² John meant to convey a resultant condition from regeneration.²³ He wanted to emphasize the fact that the power of love comes through regeneration (John 3:3). When one places his or her faith in Christ for salvation (Galatians 3:2), the Spirit of God comes to live within his or her soul. One becomes a temple for the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Through walking in abiding relationship with Christ through that Spirit, believers are empowered to develop and display the love of Christ (Romans 5:5, Galatians 5:16, Galatians 5:22).

Verse 14

In verse 14, John said “And we have seen and we testify that the Father has sent his Son as the world’s Savior” (1 John 4:14). The word “we” referred to the apostles. In the original language of the text, it appeared in an emphatic position. One has commented, “The verse strikes with such force.”²⁴ John wanted to be clear. He wanted to demonstrate, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he and the Twelve had received personally from the Lord. They were firsthand eyewitnesses of the incarnation (1 John 1:1-2). John and his apostolic counterparts were qualified to speak about love and Jesus. The Gnostics were not.

The word translated “seeing” was used in John’s Gospel to speak of the apostles’ personal interactions with Jesus (John 1:14). As used in our text, it appeared in the perfect tense. Thus, it depicted a definitive action in the past that produced abiding results. John meant to portray the incarnation as making a permanent impact on the Twelve.²⁵ Though “no one has ever seen God” (1 John 4:12), the apostles themselves had “seen” Jesus. They were official witnesses of His life and ministry. Those who were misleading the church had not seen Jesus. They were in error and they were leading people astray.

The word translated “testify” appeared in the present tense. Set against John’s previous use of the perfect tense (“seen”), the word depicted the apostles making a continual testimony concerning Jesus after having personally seen Him. John appealed to his apostolic authority as grounds for his assertions concerning the need for Christian love amongst the church. John and the other apostles had personally heard the Lord’s teachings on love (John 13:34 and 15:12).

Furthermore, John and the apostles had personally testified “that the father... sent his Son as the world’s Savior.” The word translated “sent” was the word commonly used of apostolate commission. It spoke of one dispatching another on a mission to serve as an official representative. John used the word previously to speak of the incarnation (1 John 4:9 and 10). Though the Gnostics denied Christ’s bodily appearance, John knew that Jesus came in human flesh. He upheld the incarnation as a proof of God’s love for humankind (John 15:13). The church had proof of priority of love through the way in which God became man for mankind’s sin. The church also had power to love through the incarnation. Although it may have seemed impossible to love the hateful heretics (1 John 2:9-10), such love was possible through Christ. Jesus had suffered and died to break the power of sin in people’s lives. He Himself loved even the most unlovable of people. His presence within believers could empower them to do the same.

Verse 15

In verse 15, John spoke of the way in which one was converted to Christ. He said, “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God—God remains in him and he in God” (1 John 4:15).

²² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 598.

²³ Akin, 183.

²⁴ Akin, 183.

²⁵ Ross, 204.

The apostle's words may have seemed arbitrary to a discussion on Christian love. However, they provided insight concerning how one could appropriate the love of God into his or her life. The word translated "confesses" is one John had used earlier in his letter (1 John 1:9). He used it in 1 John 4:2-3 to speak of the Gnostics' failure to confess Jesus as Lord. The word was a compound word in the Greek language that literally meant "to say the same thing." Used in the context of our current verse, it referred to the confession of faith that brought salvation (Romans 10:9-10). To be saved from sin and death, one must say the same thing about his or her sinful condition that God would say.

John's assertion that "Jesus is the son of God" was a direct rebuttal of Gnostic teaching. The heretics denied the incarnation of Christ. They reduced our Lord to a mere phantom being, an enlightened teacher who conveyed important realities about God (1 John 2:22 and 3:23). John argued to the contrary, upholding a doctrine we know as "the hypostatic union." Jesus was fully God and fully man. While the word "Son" underscored the humanity of our Lord, the word "God" upheld His deity. Both aspects of our Lord's nature were critical to Christian salvation. If Jesus was not fully man, He would not have been able to offer a sacrifice for man's sin. If He was not God, He would not have been able to offer a sinless sacrifice.

For John, confession concerning both Jesus' human and divine nature was necessary for salvation. Once one made such a profession, he or she had promise of eternal life. John said, "God remains in him and he and God." The apostle's words were a clear reference to regeneration and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. When one is saved, a portion of God's Spirit comes to live within that individual's soul.

In his gospel, the apostle recorded Jesus' promise concerning the coming of the Spirit (John 16:7). Before Christ ascended into heaven, He promised to send the Third Person of the Trinity to dwell amongst the church (Matthew 28:20 and Acts 1:8). Paul revealed that the Holy Spirit permanently seals believers at salvation and serves as a guarantee that believers will remain safe and secure until the end of time (Ephesians 1:13-14).

John spoke of the spirit in the context of his discussion regarding Christian love for a reason. He wanted the real believers of Asia Minor to remember that the Spirit of God had been poured into their souls at salvation. The presence of the Spirit provided power to love. He could give the church the will, desire, capacity, and power to love like Jesus. John's point was that Christian love is a gospel love. It isn't produced by the flesh. It far exceeds the man-centered displays of so-called affection that are marked by little more than flattery, people pleasing gimmicks, and selfish manipulation (1 John 3:18). The Spirit of God within the soul of a believer brings an otherworldly capacity to love like God.

Verse 16a

The first part of verse 16 was designed to remind believers of how they had learned about Christian love. In the verse, John said "And we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us." The word translated "we" was emphatic in the original language.²⁶ As in verse 14, John emphasized the apostolic witness of Jesus. This time, however, he intended to include his readers in the pronoun as well. His point was that all believers had been witnesses of God's love through the gospel. The cross communicated the love of God. One could discover what real love was by looking at Jesus. Such was the point of Ephesians 5:25.

The word translated "know" was the famous Gnostic word for their supposed special knowledge. John used it to speak of the knowledge of Christ that brings eternal life (John 17:3). According to the New Testament, one is first saved by a knowledge of the gospel (Galatians 4:9). As used in our text, the word "know" appeared in the perfect tense, depicting a past action that resulted in permanent realities.²⁷ John's verbiage carried the idea of "we have

²⁶ Akin, 184.

²⁷ Akin, 184.

come to know and still know.”²⁸ Though Satan and the world hurl many obstacles against the true knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:5), the true Christian will exhibit a continual growth “in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). When one advances in such knowledge, one will learn that love is the real mode of godly living (1 Corinthians 12:31, 13:13; Galatians 5:13-22).

The word “believe” was also perfective in the original language. John’s intent was to promote the love of God as “a lasting and settled conviction” amongst his readership.²⁹ The true believers in Asia Minor needed an ongoing faith in God’s love. Along with a growth in knowledge, a growth in faith was needed. By knowing and trusting in God’s love, Christians would be able to develop love in their own hearts.

John’s reference to “the love that God has for us” revealed the object of real knowledge and faith. Christian knowledge is not ignorant and Christian faith is not blind. They are built and based upon fixed realities. In particular, Christian faith is fixed on the cross of Christ and the love of God displayed through that cross. If believer’s wanted to grow in love, they only needed to grow in their knowledge and faith of the gospel. True charity springs forth from the cross. Man-centered, mystical religion could not produce the love of God amongst John’s readers. It was only in Jesus that the church would learn to love like Jesus.

²⁸ Robertson, 234.

²⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 598.