

Love in 1 John 4

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Introduction.

- A. On at least one level, the Bible is a deceptively simple book. Other than all the weird names, it only uses a vocabulary of about 10,000 different words. Any reasonably intelligent sixth-grader is capable of reading the Bible and understanding its main themes. It's not a book written for the intelligentsia; it's written for us.
- B. However, even though all of those things are true, they fail to capture the intricacy and complexity of Scripture. We can read through a Biblical context, believe that we've understood everything we've just read, yet, when asked to explain the meaning of a particular verse, we find ourselves unaccountably at a loss for words. Part of the problem there is the density of the Bible. The inspired authors of Scripture usually move at a blistering pace, explaining a complex spiritual thought in clear, concise terms, then moving on to another thought before we've really had a chance to wrap our minds around the first.
- C. This is especially true in 1 John. Even by Biblical standards, 1 John is simply worded. However, just because its words are simple doesn't mean that its ideas are simple. 1 John deals with complicated subjects, and John addresses them with a literary style that, although logical, is unlike anything else I've ever read.
- D. This lends itself to two main problems. On the one hand, it's not at all hard to read 1 John superficially, to blast through the book feeling like we understand it all, when in fact, we have understood very little. On the other hand, if we do get down into the inner workings of the book, it's easy to be so confused by them that we lose sight of the meaning of the text altogether. When preparing this sermon, I began four separate outlines for one context of 1 John and threw the first three away after I realized I was missing something. However, friends, as challenging as this text is, we can't allow it to fall prey to the twin evils of incomprehension and confusion. Let's look at it carefully this morning, to see what John has to say to us about love in 1 John 4.

I. Commanding and Defining Love.

- A. This context on love begins innocently enough, in 1 John 4:7-11. The first couple of verses are very logically structured. John gives a command, "Love one another," then three reasons why we should love one another. First, he says that we should love one another because love is from God. Here's why this makes sense: if love is from God, then God must want us to do it. Likewise, John says that everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. This one is a bit harder to figure out. After all, all of us know people whom we would describe as loving people—they love their families, they love their pets, and so on—who are NOT born of God and do NOT know God. The thing is, though, this verse isn't talking about that common, human kind of love. It's talking about a different kind of love, a love that can only be known and understood by coming into contact with God.
- B. The third reason that John gives is stated negatively. He says that the one who does not love does not know God, because God is love. Remember, friends, Christianity is not about learning a bunch of Biblical factoids while remaining the same people we were. Christianity is about being changed by the power of God. If we aren't being changed, if we aren't constantly growing in our love for one another, it shows that we're not in contact with God at all. It's impossible to have a relationship with God without becoming more loving.
- C. John shows why this is true in the next couple of verses. He argues, in fact, that love is defined by the actions of God. The first element of Christian love that John wants to highlight is its aspect of service. Notice what's going on in vs. 9. We're doing nothing, and God's doing all the work. This tells us that our understanding of love needs to involve service. We can't very well say that we love God, and do nothing for Him. We can't very well say that we love our brethren, but do nothing for them. Genuine love always expresses itself in action.
- D. The next verse defines love as selfless. God here isn't described as helping us because we were His buddies and did nice things for Him. Instead, His love revealed itself in helping us even though we did not love Him. This is a hard lesson to learn. Some people in our lives make it easy for us to love them. Along these lines, I can't help but think of Mabel Hall, who, every time I walk through the door to visit her and Shirley, says, "I love you," and obviously means it. The Mabels of the world aren't too hard to love. The people who are hard to love, though, are the ones who are just as clear about having no love for us whatsoever. Whether they're actively mean to us or just indifferent, we're tempted to pay them back in their own coin. That's not what this text says, brethren. We have to love everyone, regardless of whether they love us or not.
- E. From these actions of God, John draws the obvious conclusion: if God loved us like that, we ought to love one another too. For Christians, love isn't really a choice. As we experience the love of God expressed through Christ, we understand that that love compels us to love everyone around us too. How could we do less?

II. Consequences of Love.

- A. John discusses the consequences of this kind of love in 1 John 4:12-18. Notice that this context begins with a problem. Even though we love God, we can't see Him. The rest of vs. 12 describes the solution to this

problem. It's true that we can't see God, but if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. For the next few verses, John is going to explain how love can produce those two results.

- B. He begins in vs. 11 by tackling the question of how we know that God abides in us if we love one another. Think of this as a mini logical proof. Step one of the proof is that God has given us His Spirit. In the first century, this was in the form of spiritual gifts; today, it's in the form of the word. In both cases, though, the results are identical. After this, John notes the external effects of coming to know God through the Spirit. Someone who knows God has seen that He sent Jesus to save the world and will testify to that effect. These things are external evidences that someone has God abiding in His heart. We can presume, until it's proven otherwise, that anyone who would make such a confession abides in God, and God abides in him.
- C. John then explains why THAT's true in vs. 15. Just as John and his companions saw externally and testified externally, so because of their encounter with the love of God, they know internally and believe internally. Remember, folks, the Biblical idea of knowing isn't just about intellectual knowledge; it's about knowing through experience. The only way that we can truly know the love of God is by doing just what John says next: by abiding in that love. In other words, the love of God moves us to want to express that love to others. As we do that, we inevitably end up abiding in God, and have God abiding in us. That's the first part of what we see in the topic sentence in vs. 12. We see that if we love one another, God abides in us.
- D. The second part of the topic sentence, that the love of God will be perfected in us, is what John is going to unpack in vss. 17-18. The starting point is actually in the last phrase of vs. 17. He says here that because we abide in love, just as God is, so we are in the world. This points back to the definition of love in vss. 9-10. If we truly abide in love, just as God selflessly served others, so we spend our time selflessly serving others, along with God Himself. That's how the love of God is perfected or completed: when it takes over our entire lives. As a result, we can have confidence in the day of judgment. John explains why this would be so in the next verse. The starting point here is the idea that fear involves punishment. Why would we be afraid on the day of judgment? Because we think that we're headed to a destination we aren't going to like, that's why! If that's so, we have two problems. First of all, we haven't been abiding in love for others, and second of all, instead of being lovingly God-focused, we are un-lovingly self-focused. Both our actions and our attitude are wrong. If we ARE perfected in love, though, all that changes. We have been abiding in love for others, and we're so focused on them and on God that it wouldn't occur to us to be worried about ourselves.

III. Applications of Love.

- A. That, to me, is the truly difficult part of the text. The next part is easier to understand, and it's found in 1 John 4:19-5:3. John starts off by kind of fattening us up for the kill a little bit in vs. 19. He says something that he's already established and that everyone who considers himself a Christian would agree with: because God loved us first, we love Him. However, as John goes on to prove, this idea has serious consequences.
- B. John starts in on those consequences by saying that if we claim to love God, but we hate our brethren, we're lying. Just like he did in the first section, he's going to prove this idea in three different ways. The first one is based on logic. He observes that if we don't love the brother whom we have seen, how can we love the God whom we haven't seen? That only stands to reason. After all, if I can't stand my brother because he gets on my nerves, but claim to love God, it's likely that I just love God because I HAVEN'T seen Him yet.
- C. For the second proof of the idea that we lie if we claim to love God, but we hate our brother, John turns to the commandment. God says we must love one another, so if we don't listen, it's a sign that we really don't love God. The third proof is in 1 John 5:1. John appeals to the natural way that love should work in our spiritual family. Every Christian has been born of God, and if we love our Father, we should love His children.
- D. Next, John gives us a way to check whether we're doing this or not. Love is such a big, abstract concept that people do all kinds of abominable things in the name of love. How can we make sure we're on the right track? That's what vss. 2-3 are about. We know that we love the children of God when we love God and keep His commandments. First of all, notice that this sets up something of a virtuous cycle. As we saw earlier, we know that we love God when we love the children of God, and now he tells us that we know that we love the children of God when we love God. Those two ideas aren't separate. They're mutually reinforcing, and we can't have one without the other. Either we love both God and His children, or we love neither one of them.
- E. Second, though, we love the children of God by keeping God's commandments. John explains why this is true in vs. 3. The love of God is keeping His commandments. This is true in two different senses. We express our love for God by keeping His commandments, but we also express the love that God has for everyone by treating them as His commandments dictate. Sometimes, people say that they're all about loving people, but not too concerned with the commandments, but that's nonsense. Every commandment of God is an application of love. We aren't wise enough and good enough on our own to know how to act lovingly all the time, so God tells us what His love would do in every circumstance. Whenever we depart from the commandments of God, we can claim to be loving, but in reality, we're serving ourselves and not Him. Only by devotion to the commandments of God do we truly express love for God and for His children.

Conclusion. If you want to live your life in the service of love, begin today by coming to God.