

How can we constantly love each other?

1 John 4:7-21

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What is love? I asked this question on our Facebook pages last week. Some of you provided me with some great answers. Marlis shared some definitions of love from kids.

- Chrissy – age 6 said "Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs."
- Nikka - age 6 - If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend who you hate,"
- Jessica - age 8 - "You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget."
- Noelle - age 7 - "Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, then he wears it every day."
- Karl - age 5 - Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other."
- Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well."
- Love is giving the last piece of cake to your sibling.
- Love is when your sibling gives you the last piece of cake.
- Love is letting the person behind you in the grocery line go first.
- Love is Selflessness: placing someone else and their needs ahead of your own.
- Love is laying down your life for another; Pointing people to Jesus; Kind; Patient; Keeps no record of wrong.
- Love is when you care even though you are flipping mad, disappointed, or hurt.
- Love is not this mushy feeling as much as it is a choice to act on the emotion. The more you act lovingly to someone the more likely you are to begin loving them. Love is choosing to be a servant to others and becoming other entered instead of self-centered as Christ did for the all people!
- Love is unwavering commitment.
- Love is sacrificing me for the we.

Thank you to all who shared your thoughts with me. Now it's great to think and talk about love. It's another thing to actually do it. None of us loves perfectly. In fact, if someone went through our lives and could see all our

thoughts and motives, they would discover that some of our loving acts were much less loving in our thoughts or reasons.

A classic example of this kind of love was Nellie Olsen from *Little House on the Prairie*. She was the oldest daughter of a wealthy family living amidst poor farmers on the prairies. She was spoiled and thought herself superior to everyone else. So when Nellie wanted to be your friend or when Nellie was nice to someone there had to be something behind it. Most people knew about Nellie's self-centered reputation was known widely. But we might be a little more subtle in disguising our apparently loving acts and their un-loving motives.

And then we read and hear Jesus say - A new commandment I give to you. Love one another." And we have seen John say – Whoever loves his brother abides in the light and in him there is no cause for stumbling." "For this is the message that we heard from the beginning, that we should love one another."

Yet there are times we fall short. So what can we do? Well today's passage from first John reveals to us that we do not have to go it alone in this "loving others" thing. It points to the high standard of love that God expects from His people. But it also reveals the great power God gives to His people to offer this kind of love. It comes from God Himself. **God's love empowers us to love.** We can constantly love each other and offer love with pure hearts and minds by turning to and plugging into God's love.

This passage reveals a couple of ways God's love empowers our love for others. It also includes a surprising result of our loving one another. My prayer is the Holy Spirit will use this message today to comfort, convict and encourage. I pray it comforts those of you who doubt God's love for you. I pray it convicts and helps those struggling to love others. I pray it encourages all of us to plug in to God's love so we can love one another even more.

1 John 4:7-12, ESV

7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. **8** Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. **9** 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. **10** 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. **11** Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. **12** No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

How does God's love empower our love?

God's love is the source of our love. John begins this section on love by reminding his readers that he loves them. "Beloved." Then he makes the appeal – "Let us love one another." But why? For love is from God, whoever loves has been born of God and knows God." So if you call yourself a Christian, love must be an essential part of your character. An unloving Christian is a contradiction in terms. Love for others marks true Christians.

But loving this way is hard. It requires time, inconvenience and effort. Left to itself, the human heart is selfish. It looks out for self and those we prefer or click with. Remember the spirits of the antichrist from last week's message? Well many of those spirits will try to influence us away from this kind of love. Yet God calls us to go way beyond ourselves and our friends to love others.

But where do we get this love? This kind of love talked about here comes from God. "Love is from God." God's Love is to be sought, guarded, nurtured and grown simply because it is God-rooted. It supernaturally originates from the Father. His love must be one of our most cherished gifts from Him.

Yet it is a gift that must not be clutched and kept away from others. Otherwise, we can turn into passionless Christians who might believe the right things and keep Christ's commands. Yet we're cold as fish. We lack warmth, affection and consideration for others. John argues that a person who claims to be a Christian, believing in Christ and obeying His commands, yet does not love actually calls their claim into question.

Look at verse 8 – "Anyone who does not love does not know God." Well that's pretty brash. How can John say that? Because God is love. So if God is love by His nature and character, anyone who does not love calls into question their relationship with God.

God is love is one of about 5 statements in all of Scripture that plainly describes Him. Jesus says God is Spirit in John 4:24. John said earlier in this letter "God is light." (1 John 1:5) The writer of Hebrews writes "God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:29) The Old and New Testament proclaim that God is holy. Leviticus 19:2 – Speak to all the congregation of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy because I am holy." 1 Peter 1:15 says "but as he (God) who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct."

Here in 1 John 4:8 and later in 4:16 John declares "God is love." Think about that. God is love.

That means without God there is no love. All love ultimately comes from Him. The ability to love in any human was put there by Him. Love is a defining characteristic of God. Yet, as Don Carson points out, God's love is sometimes

difficult to figure out in the real world when there is so much hate, war, death and evil. The Bible constantly stresses God's holiness and glory. He has or will deal with the evil.

But Carson says, when the Bible talks about God as love, it almost sounds surprised. To us, "God is love" might seem pretty familiar. But to first century readers, "God as love" was virtually unknown. Yes God was holy. Yes God would punish. The pagans believed their gods were mostly angry. So you had to offer sacrifices to appease the gods or to make them happy or favorable. But they didn't expect the gods to love them. Even today, the gods worshipped by other faiths are not portrayed as loving the people. But the Bible portrays God as perfectly good, perfectly holy and perfectly loving. So even in Judgment God is love. When we Christians begin to realize that love is this essential part of our God, to not love is to deny who we are.

Love is from God. God is love.

But what does God's love look like? It seems John decides to give them a couple of pictures of God's love before he goes on. So verse 9 – "In this the love of God was made manifest or shown among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him." God the Father sent his son into the world. He became our burden bearer and sharer. Through that sending, we have life. Through that life power of Jesus going through us, we can love. So God sent His Son into the world so that through faith in Jesus, people might receive life that produces love.

But God did not only show his love by sending His Son into the world. It got very messy. Verse 10 – "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent His Son to be a propitiation for our sins." We talked about propitiation or sacrifice of atonement back in chapter 2, verse 2. There we learned that propitiation is a sacrifice that bears wrath until it is spent. To justly reconcile with those who sinned against Him, the Holy God's wrath had to be satisfied. But instead of pouring out that wrath on us, He put his own son forward to bear His wrath in our place. This is the substitutionary atonement. This is Jesus dying in our place so that we might be forgiven.

This is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to die. Now I wonder what that was like for God? Parents who sent their sons and daughters off to war maybe gained a glimpse of what this was like for God. We're not fighting a war today. But maybe we can gain a little understanding if we're parents with children. Or if you don't have children, imagine someone in your life who is dear to you and maybe a lot younger (maybe a sponsor child) – so it's not your spouse but maybe a nephew, niece or family friend's child.

Now imagine an announcement goes out that there is an important person who is about to die unless they get a transplant. The government declares this person must not die. You don't know this person. But through some sort of registry, it's discovered that you and your child (or this other young person you're thinking of) are a match. Say the transplant will result in the death of the donor. Would you volunteer for that? Some of us might think – maybe. If we've lived a good life and accomplished a lot of the things we wanted to do, we might consider it. But then a directive comes down that the donor must be under a certain age. You're over that age. So the only people qualified to donate is your child or that other person you think of. (Some of you are probably calculating which child would I most like to send to be an organ donor). But can you even begin to imagine what it would be like to send your child away to die for someone else?

Yet that's what God the Father did out of His love for you and me. He sent His one and only son to die. We have received that love from God through Jesus' sacrifice. God demonstrated His own love for us in this – while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. When we became believers, God poured into us His Spirit and His love so that we could love others. When we realize how much we've been loved by God, we can then let God's love flow through us to others. God's love empowers us to love because He is the source of love.

How else does God's love empower our love? God's love is the example for our love. Verse 11. "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." This one we can apply directly if we're struggling in the love area. If we are too proud to love or believe that person doesn't deserve love, we need to go back to the cross. It is hard for anyone to remain arrogant and aloof from others if they contemplate the cross and all Jesus did there for them. Once we grasp how much we've been forgiven and loved, we might be a lot less selective about giving out our love. Love for others is not necessarily because we like them; nor have they earned it – but out of the great love we have received and pass on to others.

But what about those people who have wronged us or offended us? Some of you here today have suffered great harm because of someone else. Today, your greatest need might simply be to bask in God's great love for you. Despite the unloving act or actions of that other person, God deeply loves you. God is for you. God is working in you and bringing you to wholeness in Him. Some of you need to swim in God's love today.

But others may have experienced some wrongdoing. Or something may have happened that has begun to influence us so much that it almost rules over us. Maybe we are filled with bitterness and anger. We're not only bitter or angry at that person, our bitterness and anger spills out into everyday life. One little spark lights a fire. I do not want to in any way minimize wrongdoing. But are you good with being bitter and angry? Have you possibly minimized the potential of God's love in your life?

I was listening to a program where a pastor was asked the question "Why can't I overcome my bitterness and anger." I thought the pastor might focus on finding ways to reconcile with the person who harmed the questioner. But this pastor went a very different direction.

Most of our bitterness and anger towards others is rooted in an inability to be profoundly amazed at Christ's love for us in our sin. If you are struggling with bitterness then it may be that the Lord is letting the very sin that is flowing from your inability to see Christ be the means by which you come to see him.

In other words, perhaps this season of rage, anger, and a fed-up "I'm out of here and don't want anything to do with you" spirit is where you have had to come in order to see the greatness of your sin as a forgiven and justified saint. And the Lord has done it so that you would be stunned at his grace in a deeper way than you've ever been stunned by the grace of God before. And now, out of that experience can flow grace towards others.

That's the only solution here. I don't doubt that another person is part of the problem. This is probably not just a one-way thing and your fault only. But the solution is not to fix the other person. The solution is to gain a heart that is overflowingly thankful for grace from Christ and that spills over with grace towards others.

Maybe God has brought you to this point of feeling your guilt so that grace would taste sweeter than it ever has. We have to see our sin, but some of us have grown up in such goody-goody homes that we don't think we've ever done anything serious.

But unforgiveness is a hell-bent sin. The Bible says that if you do not forgive those who sin against you, God will not forgive you (Matthew 6:15). In other words, this is a mortal issue. An ongoing, unforgiving, bitter, and angry spirit will kill a person's heart, making them shipwreck their faith and prove that they never belonged to God. God is showing you how serious this sin is.

This means that now you have the potential of saying, "If he loves me still, and he forgives this, it's like forgiving the apostle Paul!" (It's like forgiving murderers, because the Bible says that if you hate your brother you've killed him [Matthew 5:21-22]). And then maybe the emotional transaction of forgiveness and justification would so overwhelm you that the resources that you do not now have for loving this other person would be given you out of that fresh, new experience of grace.

*That's what I would pray. "Forgive one another, as God in Christ forgave you" is an unbelievably important word in Ephesians 4:32. You now have the potential of feeling forgiven by God for things that are mortally dangerous, which might open the door for greater grace towards this other person.*¹

Maybe you need to stand back and take a look at yourself today. See the bitterness and anger that has come to define you. See it for what it is – an ugly cancer that threatens to envelop your entire life. Then see the cross and God the Father sending His Son to die and pay for that sin. Receive his sweet grace to wash away your bitterness.

How does God's love empower us to love? God is the source of love that we must tap into. God is the example of love that we must follow. When we love others like this, something surprising happens.

Verse 12 – "No one has ever seen God." Now where does this come from? Why is he all of sudden talking about seeing God? You're talking about loving one another John. Did you lose your train of thought for a moment? No one has seen God. Okay let's go with that for a moment John. Aren't you wrong on that? In the Old Testament, people saw God. Like in Exodus 24:9-10 – Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu saw the God of Israel. Isaiah saw the Lord in a vision. Ezekiel was given a unique view of God through visions. And some people saw God in human form like Abraham, Jacob, Samson's parents and Gideon.

But no one has really seen God in his undiluted glory. The Old Testament encounters were really glimpses of God. But you could see God in Jesus. But how could they see God after Jesus departed? How can we see God today?

John answers in the second part of verse 12 where he ties it together with loving others. – "If we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us." So when we love one another it is evidence that God lives in us. In fact, when Christians love each other, God's love is in some way perfected. Not that God's love is somehow

¹ By John Piper. ©2013 Desiring God Foundation. Website: [desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org); <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/why-cant-i-overcome-my-bitterness-and-anger?lang=en>)

incomplete. It means God's love has been brought to its desired outcome. When God sends His love into a life, and that person responds with love towards others, God's love has accomplished His purpose.

But what does this have to do with "no one has seen God?" Well, people see God when we love one another. When Christians love one another, people get a glimpse of God. His love has reached its desired outcome. One way God chose to reveal Himself to the world today is through Christians loving each other. One commentator puts it like this "God's pristine love finds its fullest possible earthly expression as people respond to the message of Christ and reach out to one another as a result." The unseen God, who once revealed himself in his Son, now reveals himself in his people when they love one another. People see God when Christians love each other.

That can help us with testing our motives for loving. We can ask "am I doing this loving act or saying these loving words so I will get something for myself? Or am I offering these in a way that people will see God and give Him glory?"

God is the source of our love. God is the example for our love. People see God when we love each other. How will you respond to this today?

Some of you need to receive it for the first time by repenting from your sin and putting your trust in Jesus.

Some of us need to swim in it and let Him clean off all those lies you were told by unloving people.

Some of us need to stand before the cross anew and see the magnitude of our sin and the even greater magnitude of God's grace. Then we must repent and go forward in grace.

Some of us need to test our love by asking, "Am I offering this so that the other person or other people see God and give Him glory?"

The more we tap into God's powerful love, we will see the definitions of love that we shared earlier move from words on a screen to realities among us. By God's love and for His glory!