

Living in God's Love (Part Four)

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening to all of you. If you're new, joining us for the first time, I'd especially again like to welcome you. This evening we're going to continue a study that we've started some time ago.

Actually, back in January, we've been picking our way slowly through 1 John, the first pastoral letter that John wrote. And this letter has a lot of wonderful things in it.

We've been focusing on one of the central themes in this letter, and that is what it means to know God. We've been asking that question as a community. What does it mean to know God?

Not just to know the theology, not just to know the correct answers, not just to know the philosophy or way of life, but what does it mean to actually have a relationship with God and what sets that apart?

And if you've been following in this letter or if you know anything about 1 John, John does not write in the way that Paul writes.

[1 : 0 2] In other words, John doesn't write in a linear fashion, laying out his propositions and his points. John's writing is much more like a spiral, and it can be really frustrating at times because he has themes and he will spiral around and around and he'll come back to the same themes again and again and again.

And the main themes that we have seen are the themes of truth and obedience and then love. And tonight, we circle back for the final time.

This is the apex. This is the pinnacle of the letter where John talks about love and what love really is. What is true love? In light of the events of this past week in Baltimore, this is an incredibly relevant topic, but it's also something that's very central and close to the heart of the Christian faith.

Love, what it is and what it means. We've, well, I'll just tell you honestly, I was originally looking at this passage.

I was looking at 1 John 4, verses 6 through 12, and my plan was to cover all of that tonight. It's just a few verses, and I thought that would be no problem. And then the more I looked at this, the more I began to realize how much there is here.

[2 : 1 7] It's so central to our question of what it means to know God. It's so central to the Christian faith. And really, it's just beautiful. And I felt like we would be sitting down to this beautiful meal and rushing through it.

And, you know, if you sit down to a beautiful meal, sometimes you just want to slow down and enjoy each bite. You want to savor it. And so I felt as I was preparing that we really needed to do that with these verses. And so rather than preaching a three-point sermon, I'm going to break this up into three weeks.

So you're just going to get point one tonight, essentially. And so we're just going to look primarily at one verse here. We're going to look at 1 John 4, verse 8.

And in particular, we're going to look at this statement. God is love. God is love. And we're going to look at what this means, and then I'll give you five reasons why it matters.

So let's pray for the Lord to help us. Father, we do recognize that this is your word. But for it to become more than ink and paper, we need your spirit.

[3 : 24] We need you to illuminate and enliven your word. Lord, we need you to open our hearts. And so we ask, Lord, just as you have shown us mercy through your Son, so in your love and your grace, you would enable us to hear you.

We know that the same word that brought existence, brought this world into being at creation, now in our midst, has the power to recreate us.

And so we pray that it would, for your glory, in your Son's name. Amen. Amen. So first of all, I want to look at this statement that John makes, this profound, mysterious claim that God is love.

I'll give you a little bit of the context, starting in verse 7. He says, So he's saying God is love.

In other words, he's saying, he's not saying God is loving. He's not saying that God feels love. Love is not just an attribute that he's putting on a list.

[4 : 45] Rather, he's saying that love is of the very essence of who God is. It's of his very nature. And this is one of those places in the Christian faith where, if you try to explain it too much, you risk losing a sense of the mystery.

You know, there's a, in the early church writings and in Scripture, we see this word *mysterion*. The sacred mysteries at the heart of the Christian faith. This is one of those.

That somehow there's a God who is one, and yet a trinity. And within those three persons, there is a love that is eternal, that has always been.

And somehow, in the mystery of God's nature, love resides at the very center. Love is his very essence. And what this means, especially in light of the context, is that God is the source of love.

He's the source of love. That's why it says in verse 7, love is from God. So many of us like to hike. And you know if you're hiking in the woods, and you're hiking on a hillside, and you come across a stream of water, a little trickle of water, immediately when you see that stream, that tells you that somewhere up the mountain, probably beyond where you can see, there's a source where that stream emerges from the rock and begins to flow down the hillside.

[6 : 10] You know that there's, because of the spring, you know that there's a source. And just as the stream points to the source up the mountain, so the sheer existence of love in the world points to the source of love beyond the mountains.

That any time, in any way, in any place, we observe the reality of love in the world, there is an inherent promise to that, that somewhere beyond the mountains, there is a source from which all of that love has come into the world.

All of the love everywhere that we see, the love between dear friends, the love between parents and children, the love between lovers, husbands and wives, the love that we have, the love that we share, all of these different kinds of love, you know, the Greeks like to categorize these kinds of love.

But really, they're all tributaries, flowing from the same source beyond the mountains. And so all love is, in one way or another, a sign of God's goodness and His blessing in this world.

And the thing is, even if you don't believe in God, some of you are here and you don't believe in God, maybe you don't know what you believe. But even if you don't believe in God, our experience of love in this life only makes sense if there's a source beyond the mountains.

[7 : 40] Our experience of love alone can only really fully be understood if there is a source beyond the mountains. And the reason is this. It's because our experience of love in this world always falls short of what we would hope for.

It always falls short. In other words, we have the capacity, and not just the capacity. We have a deep down, innate desire, a need, a hope for a kind of love.

And that hope is never fully satisfied. And if you think about your life, think about your experience of love in the world, you will find that to be true again and again and again. In all of your relationships, you know, we idealize when we're young.

I'm lucky my kids are still in this phase, but not for much longer. When you're very young, you idealize the love of your parents, and they are perfect, and they're infallible, and they love you unconditionally, and you can't imagine a more perfect love.

And then you get older, and you begin to see your parents for who they really are. And you realize that sometimes even the best parents, their love is conditional. Or you realize that maybe you had siblings, and maybe there was a clear sense of favoritism, even though your parents said, we love all of you the same.

[8 : 55] You know. Maybe your love kind of, their love is kind of maybe based on your performance a little more than you would like to think. And then you see your parents making decisions, and it really seems like they're motivated by self-love, rather than love for you.

And you go through these, and it's disillusioning, and you realize this isn't that perfect love. Right? And then you idealize your love for a friend, and I just want to find a best friend with whom I can share everything.

And maybe you have an amazing friend, and thank God for this incredible friend. But maybe there's also a bit of rivalry. And maybe your friend has some success that you didn't enjoy, and there's also kind of jealousy and bitterness there.

Maybe you just grow apart in your interests. And you realize that that wasn't really the love I was hoping for. Right? And then you think, well, maybe when I get married, then I'll find it.

And you get married, and it's great, and it's bliss, and you fall in love, and you're surging with hormones. Right? And you can't think straight. And then after about a couple of years, normally, on average, the hormones kind of run out.

[9 : 58] And you, who are you? We share a life now. And you begin to get to know your spouse about two years into marriage. And you get to know them, and it's great, but life is really mundane, and sometimes life, for long stretches, just seems like you're paying bills and fighting over who washes the dishes.

And sometimes it's really hard, and sometimes the sex is amazing, and sometimes you have maintenance sex. And more often than not, maybe you have maintenance sex.

And then more often than not, you find that there are times when neither one of you really even cares about sex. You would much rather go to sleep because you're tired.

And that sounds so much better than sex. And all of these realities begin to set, and you realize we love each other, and at times it's bliss, and at times it's really hard, and at times, sometimes we kind of feel like we hate each other.

And you realize this is marriage, and the love is good, but it's not perfect. It's not perfect. And then maybe you think, well, you know what, when we have kids, then we will be able to pour all this love in, and it will be amazing.

[11 : 08] And then you have kids, and it's incredible, and that moment in the hospital is unlike anything else. And then you move forward, and it's great, and you're losing sleep, but it doesn't matter because you still love them, and then they break stuff, and it's okay, and you still love them.

And then they don't do anything you say, and it's okay, you still love them. And then they hormones kick in, and then they say, hey, I hate you. And it's okay that you hate me because I know you don't mean it, and I still love you.

And then, and this is if you're a successful parent, they leave. And then you try to figure out, what do I do now? The love of my life, my heart, my flesh just walked out, and now they're getting married, and now they'll visit once a year at Christmas.

And then what do you do? And again and again and again, our experiences with love are wonderful, but there's something in us that says there's got to be more. There's got to be something out there that will fulfill me, that will satisfy this gnawing hunger in me, this thirst that I have.

So here's the question. Why would we have such a desire for such a love that goes so far beyond anything we can experience in this world?

[12 : 29] How could we explain that unless there is a source beyond the mountains? And there's something in us that knows it. And even if we don't know that's what we're longing for, that's what we're longing for.

So God is the source of love. He's the source beyond the mountains. And now I want to spend the rest of our time just considering why this matters, why it's worth spending a whole sermon on this statement.

So I want to just go over five reasons why I think this matters. The first reason, why does it matter that God is love, that he's the source of love?

Why does that matter? Well, first of all, it matters because it reminds us that love is not God. That love is not God. There's a philosopher, Simon May, from King's College, wrote a book called Love, a History.

It's a fascinating book tracing the evolution of our cultural approach and understanding of love. And basically, May makes a statement that we've gone in our culture, as Christianity has occupied less and less and less a place in culture, that that vacuum has been filled with love.

[13 : 52] And May writes that we've gone from being people who say God is love to being people who say love is God. And that's a really popular idea among religious people, non-religious people, conservative, liberal, doesn't matter.

Everybody loves the idea of love. And particularly, we are deeply formed by romanticism. And so we love the idea of romantic love. And so it's very common in our culture to hear people say, you know, the only real difference between religions, the differences don't matter.

They can all be boiled down to love. We just need to love each other. That's all that really matters. When we look at romance, we say, well, as long as two people love each other, whatever they want to do is fine because the love is there.

The love is the thing that makes the difference. And in all of these ways, we have gone from believing that God is love to believing that love is God. And the Apostle John is aware of this.

People were making similar claims in his day, and so he makes it very clear that this is not the case, and this is getting a little technical, so I apologize. But if you look at the original Greek, John does something interesting.

[15 : 00] In the original Greek, the word God has an article in front of it. The word love does not. You don't need to know much about that. The only thing you need to know is what that means is is that it's not reversible, is that you can only accurately translate this, God is love.

You cannot say, love is God. It doesn't work with the grammar. And he did that intentionally, I believe. And this matters because all of our definitions of what love is and how it behaves, and there are many in our culture.

The ways that we define love are many and varied. But if God is love, if God is the source, then it means that our definition of love, our understanding of what it is and how it behaves, has to be drawn from God if it's going to accord with reality.

If it's not, then it's a fiction. So that's the first thing. It reminds us that rather than enthroning human love as God, that we're able to take our love in all of its forms and place it before the throne of God and ask God, what is this supposed to look like?

And that leads us actually into the second point. The second reason this matters is this, that knowing that God is love matters because it means that we cannot claim to know God personally if there is no evidence of love in our lives.

[16 : 24] We're going to get to this more in two weeks. But we cannot claim to love, to know God personally if there is no evidence of love in our lives.

And specifically, he's talking about the love that Christians have for one another, the new commandment that Jesus gives. that that is to be the thing by which God's people are recognized.

It's the real core of hypocrisy is people who claim to be Christians without love. This leads us to the third reason why this matters.

The third reason why it matters that God is love is this, is that it reminds us that we are not the source of love. I don't know about you, but that is something that I need to be reminded of many, many, many times.

The way you know that you believe that you're the source of love is when you look at yourself and you look at your life and you listen to something like what I just said. You can't claim to know God if there's no love in your life.

[17 : 25] And if you're like me, you look at your life and you think, oh my gosh, there's a massive deficit in the area of love. There's a massive deficit. And the way you know you believe you're the source is if your response to that is to say, I gotta try harder.

I gotta buckle down. I gotta become more loving. The Bible says that doesn't work. In fact, I think that that creates more of a hardness than anything else because you resent having to do it.

We can only love others to the extent that we believe ourselves to be loved. And that means if you look at your own life and you see a deficit there like I do, the answer is not to try harder.

The answer is to go to the source. It's no coincidence that John, as he addresses his people, repeatedly calls them what?

Beloved. What he's saying is before your job, before your race, before your ethnicity, before anything else, his desire, pastorally, is that our primary identification be as beloved.

[18 : 43] And he would never ask you to love if you weren't beloved. Only God's beloved can love in the way that God loves. And so the way to become more loving is to go to the source.

Not to say, I'm going to try harder to love, but to say, I'm going to open myself up more to what it means that I am beloved. To allow myself to experience that love.

So that's the third reason why it matters. We're not the source of love. The fourth reason that it matters why God is love is because this shows us what love should look like.

It shows us what love should look like. Let's go back to the stream in the woods metaphor. Right? You come upon a stream in the woods, say you're hiking, you're out of water, you're really thirsty, do you drink it or not?

Do you drink it or not? Have you ever heard giardia? Giardia? If you've ever had giardia, you won't drink it. Right? If you haven't, still don't drink it.

[19 : 56] Right? Do you drink it or not? One of the things that really matters is how close is that stream to the source. Because the further downstream that water goes, the more pollutants get mixed into it.

Right? And the more that gets mixed in, the more impure the water becomes, the more it's probably going to make you sick. And so if you drink water right on next to the source, you're a lot better off.

But the further down you go, maybe you can drink it, maybe you can drink it, but at some point, the chances that it's going to make you sick get higher and higher and higher until there's almost certainty. Somewhere down there, it's no longer even water, it's just mud.

You know? It's just wet dirt and muck. But if you're thirsty enough, you'll drink it. And it's the same way with love. You know, we spend time in West Virginia from time to time and along the Shenandoah River.

And you know, the Shenandoah near the source is pretty clean. But the further down the Shenandoah you go, there's chicken farms all along the Shenandoah. And you can imagine what happens when it rains and all that runoff just goes into the water.

[21 : 06] And so further down the Shenandoah, it actually poses a health hazard to animals and humans. You know? We found that out the first year we told our kids, yeah, you can swim. And then we're like, rinse off, rinse off.

The further down you go, the more polluted it gets. It's the same with love. The further love is from the source, the more polluted it becomes because all kinds of junk gets mixed in.

And love can be life-giving or it can actually sometimes be so polluted that while there is a kernel of real love there, it can actually begin to do harm, right?

It can be a harmful, destructive, kind of twisted form of love. There's something in there that is of the Lord, but there's a lot of other stuff mixed in that does damage.

Like the friend that you have, and there's a part of you that loves this friend and you do loving things for that friend, but there's also a bitter, jealous rivalry between you. And you can't enjoy the successes of your friend because of the jealousy.

[22 : 10] That's a pollutant that's been mixed in with the love and it's unhealthy, you know? Or like the couple and they really genuinely marry each other, love each other. They're really genuinely committed to the marriage, but there's also a lot of jealousy and there's not a lot of trust.

And they check each other's Facebook accounts and they follow each other's email correspondence. And from time to time they check the credit card statement to see if anything unusual is happening.

And you see that mistrust is kind of mixed in with the love. These are kind of pollutants that will do damage. And what we see is the healthiest forms of love are those that are closest to the source and what does that mean?

It's love that accords with God's character. That's why it's really important to note that you can't say that love is God, only that God is love because although God is love, He's much more than love.

In fact, in the same letter He says that God is light. And so what this is telling us is we have a source against which to measure the love in our lives. To know is this close to the source, is this reflecting the same kind of love clearly, as clear as water would?

[23 : 21] Or is it dirty water? Is it polluted? Is there stuff mixed in that needs to be cleaned out? So what this tells us is we can learn how to love our kids, how to love our friends, how to love our spouses, how to love people we don't know, how to love our enemies by looking at the source of love and seeing how did He love?

How does He love? So that's the fourth reason. Knowing that God is love matters because it shows us what love should look like. And the fifth and final reason this matters is this.

The reason it matters that God is love is that it shows us what to do when love fails us in this life. It shows us what to do when love falls short.

As we said a moment ago, it will. Parents, friends, kids, spouse, it will. It won't be a failure, but it will fall short.

You will be left wanting. And there are really only two options when that happens. The first option is to look elsewhere in the world. Is to say, well, that was this relationship.

[24 : 29] Surely there's a relationship out there that will be better, that will fulfill me completely. And romanticism drives a narrative, for instance, that marriage is that thing. Romanticism drives this narrative that if you can find the right person, your soulmate, which by the way, that's a pagan myth.

That's Greek mythology. That's not Christianity. But if you find the right person, they will fulfill you. Not true. It's a lie. It's not true. King Solomon, one of the wisest people that ever lived.

700 wives. 300 concubines. Do the math on that. That's a lot of women.

Right? You know, we hear this and we say it's absurd, but, you know, guys, if you counted up the number of people you imagined having sex with, if you were to marry all of them, maybe the number's not quite as absurd as it sounds, right?

So Solomon was honest. But you look at a person like that and all of his wisdom, all of his wealth, all of his learning, and yet he's still looking for love in these women.

[25 : 49] The kind of love that can only be provided by God. And we know, actually, if you read 1 Kings 11, you realize that it was his, it says literally, 1 Kings 11 tells us that Solomon clung to these women in love.

That he was looking for that fulfillment. And he clung to these women in love and because of that it pulled his heart more and more and more away from the Lord until he abandoned the Lord and he started worshiping other gods.

G.K. Chesterton, this quote is attributed to him. Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God. Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God.

It's that deep down hunger. You know, you look at things like this, you look at our desire, our fascination with, you know, Fifty Shades of Grey or pornography or whatever, brothels, you know.

And you realize that even though within that is a deep fear of intimacy, even though within that there's a whole power dynamic, even though there's all these, we can psychologize it all day long, that at the core there is that hunger, that gnawing hunger, that gnawing thirst for that love.

[27 : 12] It's there. So that's the first option is that you can kind of get into that romanticism-fueled loop of looking for love and failing, looking for love and failing and going again and again and again and again, 700, 1,000, 2,000, more and more and more and more and more.

Or, or the second option is to look for the source beyond the mountains. In John 4, when Jesus meets the woman at the well, he knows, and he reveals, he knows that she's had five husbands, and he says, and the one you're with now is not your husband.

And yet he knows down deep beyond that, below it, behind it, that this is a woman who is in search of the kind of love that will fill her up completely. And that's what he speaks to in verse 13.

He says, everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again. He's not talking about the water, by the way. He's talking about the husbands. He says, everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.

And she says, where can I find it? He's saying, the kind of love you most need, the kind of love that will fill you up, can only be found at the source. And this is the good news of Jesus.

[28 : 35] And this is the news that we will look more at next week, actually, in great detail. The good news is this, that the love that we long for the love that we look at and we know it can't be found here and we know down deep that there is a source beyond the mountains that although even if we were to go looking, we would never be able to find it on our own.

The good news is this, that that source in Jesus Christ has come down and he has found us. And that is the promise of the Christian faith and the certainty of the love of God that we share.

let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.