

The Healthy Church (1): Love (please note there were a couple of technical glitches during the sermon where there will appear to be periods of silence - apologies)

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[0 : 00] 1 John chapter 4 and verse 7 onwards. Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and so on.

Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As you've seen, the Pre-Church of Scotland's new vision statement is a healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland. I'm impressed with that.

The first time I heard it, I was really impressed, far more than, like, generation. A passion for the whole of Scotland, for cities and villages, for the lowlands and the highlands, for the mainland and the islands.

When I was a student in the then Pre-Church of Scotland College in Edinburgh, I would venture down to the Presbyterian Hall of the Pre-Church offices at lunchtime, and I'd stare at the famous Disruption painting.

[1 : 21] Many of you, perhaps here, have seen it for yourselves. I would stare at it, and I would pray. Now, to be fair, I wasn't interested in the painting, and I'm still not really that interested in the painting.

It's the frame that inspired me, and still inspires me every time I go there. The frame. Because the frame has written on it, all the presbyteries and synods of the newly formed Free Church of Scotland in 1843.

There were places on there I had never been. The Presbytery of Orkney. Of Teviotdale.

Of Straths Bay. And my prayer as a student, and still now when I'm in the Presbytery Hall, as I look at that frame, is that in years to come, the Free Church of Scotland would have at least one church in each of these areas again.

And now, through this New Vision statement, I feel my prayer is beginning to be answered. A healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland. And our church, along with every other free church I trust, pledges to make this vision reality.

[2 : 36] But that's not what I find most helpful about this vision statement. We're not interested in having a church in every community, per se. Our aim is to have a healthy gospel church in every community in Scotland.

Because most communities in our land already have churches. But they're neither gospel churches, nor healthy churches. They're dead churches.

By contrast, we want to grow, encourage, and plant healthy gospel churches. By definition, this begs the question, what is a healthy gospel church?

What is church health in the first place? It is entirely possible for a church to be large in number, but to be unhealthy, and for a church to be small in number, but very healthy.

Size is not the issue. Last year, we began to describe church health in terms of gospel fruitfulness from the image of Jesus as the vine and we as the branches.

[3 : 44] The new vision of the Free Church of Scotland describes gospel fruitfulness as church health. And over the course of the next few Sunday mornings, I want to unpack for you what a healthy church in the New Testament looks like.

Because we aspire, do we not, to be the healthiest and most fruitful church we can possibly be to the glory of God in Glasgow and for the good of Glasgow's peoples.

And this morning we start with love. A healthy gospel church is dominated by a culture of love. The vibe, as it were, the atmosphere of the healthy gospel church is one of love.

Now, there are few better places to access the ideals of love in church than 1 John, this letter written by John, the beloved disciple of Jesus. He was a very old man when he wrote this letter from the city of Ephesus.

He had served Christ for decades and here at the end of his life, he condenses most of the lessons he has learned through his long ministry into three short letters, 1, 2, 3 John.

[5 : 06] These are the important things. Not the speculations of history, but the realities of living as redeemed sinners together in the church today.

And for John, love is to be the distinguishing characteristic of the healthy church. Love for God, love for each other. In this passage, 1 John 4, 7 through 21, we're presented with words of such depth and beauty truly as force us to our knees in worship.

Where a culture of loving one another becomes our offering of praise and worship to the God who in Christ first loved us. And so from these verses, we want to ask three very simple questions.

First, why do we love? Second, how do we love? And third, who do we love? Let's get to grips with these answers. We might think this is very basic, but it's not basic to do them.

We need the grace of Christ to do them. But if we want to be a healthy gospel church and not just a church, we need to pledge ourselves to promoting a culture of love in this place.

[6 : 27] First of all, why do we love? Why do we love? This vision of a healthy gospel church is brilliant. For no other reason than this, it places the gospel at the center of a healthy church.

Healthy gospel church. A church cannot be healthy, nor can it really be a church, unless the word gospel is central. And what is the gospel?

Is the gospel what we do for God? A long list of laws we tick off one by one. This morning over breakfast, my brother-in-law, Neil, was telling me about something a friend of his had said about his wife.

It sounds better than Dutch, I believe, because this friend of his is Dutch. But his wife's message to him every day is, my wife is like an ambulance.

She sounds like this. Do this, do that, do this, do that, do this, do that, do this, do that. Is that what the gospel is?

[7 : 36] Is the gospel about something or anything, any of us, have ever done? No. The gospel is all about what God has done for us.

God's sovereign, saving, gracious work is at the center of a healthy church. For too long, we have made ministers the center of the church.

We have made our worship culture the center of the church. We've made what we do be the center of the church. No, no, and no again, it is Christ Jesus, what God has done through him, which is to be at the center of the church.

And in these verses, we learn very briefly three things about what God has done and by consequence, the nature of the gospel, that which we hold central to our life as a healthy gospel church.

The first is this, God is love. God is love. There are no more profound statements in the whole of the Bible than that which we read in 1 John 4, verse 8, and 1 John 4, verse 16.

[8 : 49] God is love. This is who God is and what God is. Love, o theos agape esten.

It's not just what God does. It's what God is. Who God is. we need to understand this better.

The God we proclaim, the God we serve, is love. You pull back all the layers of what you believe about God and have been taught from when you were an infant.

And you should find this at the very center of it all, the burning, passionate, holy love of God. As Alex gave me a book which reminded me some time ago, the furious longing of God.

Now of course, we can trace this back to his essence as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each glorious person of the Godhead loving each other with infinite passion. But the point is that the love of, the healthy gospel church is the one with the love of God at the very center.

[9 : 59] It preaches the love of God. It lives the love of God. It sings about the love of God. The healthy gospel church isn't one where you come to hear a long list of laws you must obey.

The ambulance, do this, do that, do this, do that, do this, do that. Rather, it is the one you come to hear of a long history of love you are to receive as a free gift of God's grace.

By word and by work, we aspire to be a loving community reflecting the being of God as love. So it should not be strange to hear from the mouth of anyone in this place God is love.

In our worst days, the Free Church of Scotland was known for its proclamation of the judgmental, unforgiving, unmerciful harshness of God. The latter was deeply unhealthy.

The former was vibrantly healthy. what will we pledge ourselves to be? The second thing about why we love is because God loved us first.

[11 : 15] God loved us first. What we read in 1 John 4 verse 10 and 1 John 4 verse 19 is almost too good to be true. In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us. And we love because he first loved us.

In these verses we have the precious statement too good to be true unless it was revealed to us in scripture of the sovereign preempting love of God.

He loved us first. He loved us when we did not love him. His love comes before our love. Even from historical perspective surely we can see the truth of this.

For Jesus died on a cross nearly 2,000 years before even the oldest of us in this room were born.

God loved us before we were born. And God showed us that love in the sacrifice of his son.

And that means that as Christians we have nothing to boast of. Nothing. Cannot set ourselves around partick man or woman who walked down the street today with a fag in their hand by saying well I love God and you don't.

[12 : 22] Because of the starkness of these statements in 1 John 4 it was God's love for us that came before our love for him. We didn't love God over no one but serving God out of a sense of the tremendous privilege we have of first being loved by him.

The healthy church is fixated dominated obsessed with the sovereign preempting gracious love of God. But then the third reason why we love is that God made us to love.

God made us to love. John's writings are really world changing. They speak of a world that's born again by the sovereign love of God and the new nature he has given us leans toward love.

God has made us for love. Loving one another is the mark of new birth. Many years ago when I was a student we used to talk about the so called marks of grace.

Evidences that you were a Christian and one of them was this a new love for other Christians.

Whereas before you could take us or leave us now you're committed to us.

[14 : 24] It's the essence of the new person God has made you into. Another way in which this truth is expressed in our passage is in verses 12 13 15 and 16 in the use of the language God abides in him or God lives in him.

By the Holy Spirit God lives in the Christian. And how do we know that? How do we know that God lives in you? It's because you love other Christians. That's just what happens when the Spirit of God lives within you.

He changes you from being a creature of apathy into a creation of his love. God made us to love both by new birth and his presence within us. That's the plain teaching of 1 John 4.

So in light of this do you agree with me that a healthy church is one which is characterized by a culture of love? If you do I hope now you see why it is that we must love one another.

Because the God we serve is love. Because he first loved us. And because God made us to love. Now you will all know that my wife and I have taken up running during lockdown.

[15 : 36] We took up running and we run with the canvas long highers. A well known East Glasgow running group. Now we didn't go along to that running group thinking that we went along to that running group thinking it was a running group.

Right? But we didn't go along to it realizing to ourselves when we got there thinking well that's a swimming group. No no it's not a running group at all. It's a canoe club. It's a running club.

That is what we do. That's why we go. In the same way when someone comes to this church they're coming to a place of love.

A people of love. And a culture of love. Let's not disappoint them by being anything other than that. Well secondly we've seen why we love.

Secondly let's look at how do we love. How do we love. I do hope I don't sound as if being a loving church is an easy option because it really isn't. It's not easy to have a healthy lifestyle especially in a world of social media endless TV channels and junk food.

[16:54] It isn't easy to be a loving church. It's costly. It's not just a question of being nice. I hate that word nice. I'm so not nice.

Niceness means apathy. I know a lot of nice people who use their niceness as a mask to hide their own personal lack of commitment to me.

Unhealthy churches are filled with nice people. love. That's not to say we shouldn't be pleasant and polite to one another but surely love goes deeper than nicety.

I once heard the little rhyme to live above with saints we love that will be just glory to live below with saints we know that's another story.

but it's precisely in this territory of living below with saints we know we are here in 1st John 4. We all have our rough edges.

[18:02] Some of us are grumpier than we should be. Others of us are not as committed as we should be. Some of us are more judgmental than we should be.

others of us are more temperamental than we should be. The point is this every one of us here has idiosyncrasies. Things about you that make it hard to love you.

If you think that there's nothing about you which could possibly make you unlovable then you've already shown what's wrong with you and what makes you hard to love. A lack of self-awareness a lack of humility and complete self-delusion.

of course it's hard to love one another since when did anyone say it would be easy to love one another? Jesus loved John his beloved disciple who never caused him any problems but he also loved Peter his loud mouthed belligerent disciple who caused him rather a lot.

The question for us is this what does love really look like? Can we find a description of love that goes beyond niceties but also empowers us to love each other despite what our differences are and how much it costs us to love?

[19:20] What makes our relationships in the church? This is a very important question that we all must answer. What makes our relationships in the church different from the relationships I have with other runners in Canberts Lang Harriers?

Or from the relationships you have with your next door neighbours or your friends outside this church? You know if all we had in our Bibles was 1 John 4 verse 10 that would be enough.

In this is love. Not that we've loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. In this is love. Not that we've loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins.

We do not take our descriptions of what it means to love from the world around us. However noble these descriptions are and they are. We take our descriptions of love from the saving activity of Jesus Christ on the cross.

This is the ultimate demonstration of what it means to love. Sacrifice. Costly self-giving. And not just any sacrifice but the ultimate demonstration of such sacrifice.

[20:34] Jesus Christ dying for us. Valentine's Day tomorrow night. Walk down Dumbarton Road looking roasted bubbly jocks and you'll see loads of couples looking starry-eyed over the table at each other.

Oh I love you. Is that what love is? Love is a father giving his son to the agonizing terror of the cross.

It's the cries of pain. It's the smell of death. The sight of blood. That's how much God loved us. Not the fuzzy nice inoffensive thing but the passionate furious longing of God for us.

He loves us so much he sent his son to die on the cross for us. This is the gospel not that we love one another but that God has loved us and given us the costliest thing he could for our redemption and salvation.

And so it's the ultimate answer to the question of what our love must look like if it's to be real. It has to be costly. It has to be sacrificial. It has to be committed. It's hard but we must love.

[21:39] Not just because God sent us that example by giving his son for us but by virtue of his son's work on the cross we've been born again as a new people. We have the Holy Spirit within us.

We love like Jesus loved so costly, so hard. And you know the other feature of Jesus love here it was so real, so real.

He talked about love but he didn't just talk. He loved. He got messy in loving others. He loved those whom society rejected.

He touched the untouchable and loved the unlovable. Love by necessity is messy because it's involved. I hate messy, it's just so messy but this is love.

Love looks like blood, the blood of Jesus Christ. Healthy churches are places where we're involved in each other's lives.

[22 : 41] The good bits and the bad, the clean bits and the dirty. We love each other enough for that. Love for the standard then of our love for one another is that our thoughts toward each other, our words to each other, and our actions for each other are stained with the blood of Jesus.

That's what our church aspires to be like, a deep, messy, loving church. God's love for us will not let us go and we will not let each other go no matter how, no matter the cost to ourselves.

So I have to ask the question, to what extent am I loving you today? Is my love for you stained with the blood of Jesus Christ? To what extent are you loving me today?

Is your love for me stained with the blood of Christ? Perhaps today you feel rather on the outside of the church. Maybe you feel as if no one loves you this way.

I'm sorry you feel that way but let me ask you a question. Let me come back to you. Are you loving others the way that God loves you? Are you putting the interests of others before your own, getting your hands dirty with the complex problems others have and emptying yourself for them?

[24 : 04] Are you? The healthy church is filled with the blood stained, messy hands of those who love others because God has first loved them and sent his son to die for them.

That's how we love. And then third and last, who do we love? Who do we love? I want to reiterate this because it needs to be emphasised again and again and again the challenge of loving one another in the church.

From verse 10 we learn that those whom God loved were sinners. See that? Those whom God loved were sinners. They did not love him but he loved them. Their sin deserved his judgement but he gave them his son instead.

Those whom God loves are not perfect. In fact, they were very far from perfect. Those whom God loves are unlovable and those whom God calls us to love are not perfect.

again we might think in our self-deluded pride but there's nothing about us which is unlovable.

[25 : 17] When we rub up against the rough edges in others we are easily offended. In our hearts we think to ourselves why can't they be just perfect like me? Why can't they be just easy to love like me?

Why is it so difficult? And so you set a condition upon John's command to love one another and you say well I'll play my part to love them if they'll play their part to love me.

I'll love them if they make it easy to love me. I'll be committed to them as long as they don't hurt or offend me if they don't disagree with me in any way, shape, or form or are thoughtless toward me.

Then I'll love them. Now I don't guess any of us have ever said these precise words but at base this is the reason, this is what the reason I cannot love that Christian in the church is because he makes it so hard for me to love him.

He is so loud. He is so unthinking. He is so extrovert. Brethren and sister in the church, who do you think you are to think such a thing?

[26 : 25] How proud our hearts must be to even think such a thing. Do we not recognize that God loves not the perfect us, but the unlovable us?

If God thought the way that we do, not one of us would be here, not one, and most certainly, not me, the most unlovable of you all.

Worked example exercise. You don't get to pick or choose whom God is commanding you to love today. Look around this room.

Go on, look around this room. I'll give you ten seconds to look around this room. There's no bar to this in preaching. Look around this room.

These are whom God is calling you to love today. Not an imaginary perfect crew. Yes, there are awkward people among us and there are difficult people among us.

[27 : 33] There are quiet ones among us. Hey, there are really grumpy ones among us. There really are. There are those of us who will not let you in and there are those of us who will not let you out.

Some of us are very different. Don't idealize the command of Jesus here and abstract it from reality. Look around you. This is who God is calling you to love today.

And we must stop making excuses for our lack of love for one another. Stop it. The healthy church is one which is made up of a raft of different people.

All of whom are united by this one common truth. God has loved them and sent his son to be the propitiation for their sins. There is no other institution on earth like the church.

One where such a disparate set of people come together to live and to die not for themselves but for each other. This is the healthy church.

[28 : 42] All that's left for me to do is to point you to the cross of Jesus and to challenge you. In dying love for you, will you love me?

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we confess before you we find it difficult to love. Perhaps because we've been hurt before and we know that when we love another person we open ourselves out to them and make ourselves vulnerable to them and they can hurt us.

Lord, we pray that you would be with those of us who are like that who have hardened hearts because we've been hurt so often. Open us up again to the vulnerability and weakness of hurt.

Make us more and more like Jesus Christ who though he was betrayed and though he was hurt, yet three days after he died and after he risen again, he met Peter on that beach and he looked into his eyes and said, Peter, do you love me?

we ask these things in Jesus name, Amen.