

What is Love?

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[0 : 0 0] The reading is taken from 1 John chapter 4 verses 7 to 12. Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. 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. 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. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us. Great. I would be very grateful if you just keep that Bible passage open, or turn it open again, if you would, to 1 John 4. And I just want to have a look at verse 10 for the next few minutes, because I think it's a really important verse from the Bible. Let me read it to you again.

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 1962, one Saturday night when she was just 35, Marilyn Monroe took her an overdose of sleeping pills. And when she was found the next morning, she was found apparently by her maid lying on a couch with the phone hanging off the phone set next to her. And when they looked into it further, what they found was that just before she died, after she'd taken the overdose, she phoned another Hollywood actor and told him what she'd done in desperation, told him what she'd done.

And he'd replied with the famous words of Rhett Butler from the film Gone with the Wind, frankly, my dear, I don't give a blank. They were the last words she ever heard, the last words of hurt and rejection in a life which was full of rejection and hurt. She lived an extraordinarily sad life.

She was in the paper again this week, an article about her. She was in foster homes for Master of Her Life because of her mother's mental illness. When she was eight, in one of them she was raped by one of the boarders. And when she reported it, she was beaten. And then, well, she grew up so pretty that she got to Hollywood and she was very famous, but she was hated by the sound crews and the film crews with whom she worked because she kept them waiting on stage all the time, on the set all the time.

[3 : 0 4] What they didn't know was that she was in her caravan or her dressing room throwing up with terror and fear of failure and a desperate desire to be loved and a desperate desire to succeed. And there was a journalist who wrote an article about her just after she died, which was entitled, What Really Killed Marilyn Monroe, the Love Goddess, who never knew any love? And I guess we would all say that she was a very extreme case, wouldn't we? I mean, I hope our lives are not that sad. There may be, perhaps. Perhaps there's somebody here who has a life that sad. But however sad or happy our lives are, I guess we know why she felt like that, don't we? Because we all do know what it feels like to want love. We all want to be loved.

We all want to be really loved. And we all want to be really loved, despite what we're really like. So that Marilyn Monroe may have been an extreme case, but she's by no means the only case.

And we look for love. And we look for it in all sorts of things. Pretty obvious, I suppose. Very obvious sort of thing to say. Romance and sex and families and friendship. And to one degree or another, we find it or we don't find it. But what may not be obvious is this. This, which this verse is saying, according to the Bible, according to Jesus Christ and his first followers, it is impossible for us to find love properly until we find the sort of love that Jesus is bringing. That's what this verse is saying. It says, in this is love, i.e. ultimate or real love. Love full stop. Love in itself. This is love. Where do you find love? You want to find love? This is where you go. Not that we've loved God, because we haven't, but that he has loved us and sent his son as a propitiation for our sins. We'll come back to that propitiation word in a minute if it's gobbledygook for you. But it's this love thing I want to centre on as I start. This verse tells us that if you want to find love, or if anybody does, it's actually got to be Jesus Christ you go to. And I want to suggest to you there are three very strong reasons from the verse why we should want to take that seriously. I just want to have a look at them in turn. Incidentally, I know, I don't know where you stand on these things this morning.

I like coming to a church. I mean, I know a number of us are already convinced of that, so we're already convinced of it. But I guess I hope there are some who aren't. Because I think this is worth really looking at. And I'm also aware that when you hear a vicar talk about God loving you, that is a little bit of a cliché. So I am aware of that. But I suppose what I'm trying to say is this, that it's a bit like somebody who goes to the Antiques Roadshow. And they take along this little old painting, which is in the loo downstairs at the back at home, which is a bit grimy and nobody's ever taken any notice of.

And it turns out to be a Vermeer. There is at least a possibility that this message that God loves us in Jesus Christ is a masterpiece and a gem.

[6 : 26] And I want to suggest to you that it is the gem, the one that matters. And as I said, that's for three reasons. The first is that this verse is talking about a love that is completely unique. I was looking for a picture this week, and I'm looking for an old version of it, and I found it. And it's an amazing picture. You might like to have a look at it sometime, perhaps Google it or whatever. It's called The Raising of the Cross by Rembrandt, perhaps you know it. And it's a picture which is covered in gloom. And around the picture, there are these Roman soldiers and these Jewish leaders and these crowds who are all circling around the cross on which Jesus is dying. And they're all in the gloom. And there are only two figures who are in the light, in the very centre of the picture. One of them is Jesus himself, who's on this cross diagonally stretched across it, as the cross is agonisingly raised up to vertical. And the other is a figure who's holding the cross, right in the centre of those who are raising it up. And he's a figure who's really out of place, because he's a man in a blue hat. It's a 17th century hat. He looks like an artist, because he is an artist. It's Rembrandt's own portrait of himself, right at the centre of those rising up the cross. Self-portrait of himself as a crucifier. And he's saying two things in that picture.

He's saying, I am a crucifier. He's speaking about what he's like, and what we're all like. And secondly, he's saying, Jesus Christ's love casts light even on crucifiers.

And those are two vital things to understand. You're going to see how unique God's love is, because I think we do find it very hard to believe that we are what Rembrandt thought we were, that is crucifiers. I think it's really easy to think that we basically are positive towards God, that we love him. But Rembrandt and this verse say we don't. In this is love, not that we've loved God, but that he loved us. And it is actually true that we don't, isn't it? I don't know if you look into your heart and you think you love God, naturally speaking. Let me ask you a question. Do you always long to be with him? Do we always long to be with him? Do we always long to do what pleases them?

Because if you love somebody, you always long to do what pleases them. And do you have to try to remember God, or do you have to try and forget him?

The fact is, we have to try and remember him, don't we? Sure-fire sign that we don't really love him, because if you love somebody and you really love them, you can't help remembering them. We don't love God, naturally.

[9 : 42] And you might say to me, well, okay, I don't love God, I'm not his enemy. I'm just a bit apathetic towards him. Cold shoulder, perhaps. And you have to ask yourself the question, don't you?

What is a cold shoulder to somebody who's given you a priceless gift? You know, somebody comes along at Christmas, they give you an amazing present, quite mind-blowingly beautiful present that you weren't expecting, and you turn the cold shoulder on them.

What is that? Is that just apathy? Or is that antagonism? There's not much of a difference between the two, is there, when you turn the cold shoulder to somebody who has given you amazing things.

And if there's a God, he's given you amazing things, and he's given me amazing things. He's given us everything that we have, and the fact is that we do turn the cold shoulder on him every day.

You can be a crucifier with apathy just as much as with antagonism. Pontius Pilate turned the cold shoulder on Jesus Christ. We're enemies of God.

[10 : 54] We reject him. Have a good we are, have a nice we are. We are enemies of God. And the extraordinary thing is that he loves us. That's the second thing Rembrandt was showing, the light shed from the cross of Jesus on him.

What this verse is saying, in this is love, not that we've loved God, but that he loved us. There isn't a love like that in this world.

We don't love like that. We love people who love us. Don't love people who deliberately hurt us. Think of loving somebody who actually goes out of his way to hurt you.

It's impossible, isn't it? Or we love people who are attractive to us, sexually attractive, or attractive as a family member or a friend. We love them, but we don't love people who are hateful to us.

And actually, you don't find this sort of love in the religions of the world either. I think a lot of people miss that. This is unique about the Christian faith. All the other religions work on the basis that God will love us if we love him enough.

[12 : 04] And lots of people think that's what Christianity is saying too. Love God enough and he'll have you. And it's really not. It really is saying exactly the opposite.

It really is saying he loves you and has loved you and has made a way for you to be accepted. When you then begin to love him.

That's a unique sort of love. Raises the question, doesn't it? What you do with unique things. I was reading about this situation in the 1860s in South Africa in a place where there was a river with lots of rather beautiful little pebbles.

And there were some children around there who were playing with these pebbles. They had this game called Clip Clip. They played with them. I don't quite know how it worked but they didn't have any toys basically. They played with these stains. And they didn't think very much of the fact that the pebbles were pretty except that they preferred them to boring ones.

Anyway, they were playing the game one day and there was one particularly beautiful pebble and they just chucked it in a pile in the corner of the kitchen, farmhouse kitchen, when they finished playing. They didn't give it another look. Nobody gave it another look until a guy called Schauk van Niekerk came round, a neighbouring farmer.

[13 : 20] And he gave it another look. He thought it was very pretty. In fact, he asked to buy it. And they thought it was a bit odd. You know, why buy a pebble? I think eventually they just gave it to him and he sent it off in an unsealed envelope to the local town, to Graham's town to be assessed by an assessor there.

Now, to cut a long story short, turned out to be the Eureka Diamond. The Eureka Diamond, 21.5 carats in its original form, was not the greatest of the diamonds to be found in the South African diamond fields, but it was the first and the key to all the others, the extraordinary gems that have been found in those fields of South Africa.

And it raises the question, doesn't it? What do you do with something that is unique and stands out as unique? Do you think it's worth giving it a second look? Like Schauk van Niekerk, especially if lots of other people have said they've found it to be the diamond, which counts.

It's a love that's unique. Secondly, it's a love that's effective. And this is what this propitiation word is all about. Let's cut through the jargon and the theologies.

It just means that when Jesus died, he turned away the anger of God. We often illustrate it a bit like this. If this is me and the light up there is God, then there is a barrier between me and God set by him because I'm a hater of God and I'm a sinner.

[14 : 51] And there's one person who hasn't been like that. And if you've ever seen this way of explaining it before, you'll know that that's Jesus. He's the only one who didn't live like that. What happened when he died?

Well, when he died, God's anger, which was due to me, was transferred to him so that he paid the price for the sins of the world so that if I put my trust in him and accept his forgiveness, I can be somebody who has no barrier between me and God, no anger from God against any of my sins for the rest of my life and for eternity.

Propitiation. That's what it means, turning away the anger of God by his death on the cross. And it's vital to understand it because the Bible's not just saying that God said he loved us and showed us he loved us and had gooey feelings towards us when he sent Jesus.

It's saying that he actually did something. That is, he brought us back to him. He made it possible for us to know him. He took away the barrier between us. He made us at one with him.

And we badly need it. Of course, some people really hate that idea. Maybe you do. Maybe you think, as soon as I say that, look, this is typical, isn't it?

[16 : 15] This is a vicar and he's talking about God being angry and I hate the idea that God's angry and I hate the idea that the Bible says that God's angry with sin and that just contradicts this whole idea that God's loving, doesn't it?

As soon as you talk about God being angry and God being loving at the same time, you can't have them both. Say God's angry, it just shows that talking about God's love is just baloney.

I want to suggest to you that exactly the opposite is the case. Isn't it? Do you remember the Srebrenica massacre?

Just one of the most tragic things I think there's been in our lifetime, don't you think? Or was it 1995? I've got it written down here. 1995, 1996, I think.

Srebrenica in Bosnia, Herzegovina and it was a safe area. July 1995. Safe area, declared a safe area by the UN and there were Dutch UN peacekeepers in the area and yet, in July 1995, 8,000 Bosnian men and boys were massacred by the Serbian army.

[17 : 29] Not just men and boys, actually. Some babies, some women, some girls. The question is this. What happens about a massacre like that?

Worst massacre there's been in Europe since the Second World War. On this earth, we try and deal with it. Radovan Karadzic is being tried for it at The Hague still at the moment, I think, isn't he?

Very long trial going on for a very long time. And they've never caught General Mladic, who was the man behind it. What do we think about that? What do we think about God's response to that?

Some people would say if there's a God of love, actually, he won't do anything about it. Surely, if there's a God of love, he will. The Bible says there's a God of love.

A God who loved those 8,000 men and boys and all those women too much not to want to punish those who did that to them.

[18 : 30] And we don't know if Karadzic and Ladic will get away with it, do we? They may do on the face of this earth. What the Bible is saying is they won't get away with it.

They really will not because there is a God of love. A God of love who is also, therefore, a God of justice. A God of justice for all those dead people who were his creatures whom he loved.

And that is actually good news to live in a world where there's a God of justice. Do you know something? It's also very bad news. It's extremely bad news for me.

Because I may not have murdered anybody but I really have hurt people. I really have made people feel small. I really have made people unhappy.

And do you know something? I'm pretty sure you have too. And that is why it is really good news that Jesus died in my place on the cross.

[19 : 37] I don't know if you've ever heard it put like this. Imagine you reach the end of your life. And the Bible says is that death for all of us is like the doorway into a courtroom.

And it's a doorway not into the lawyer's benches where we can argue our case nor into the spectator's stalls where we can see somebody else being assessed and judged but into the dock.

And in that courtroom you might say there is an accusing lawyer accusing counsel. I call him Satan. And he will read out a long list of all my crimes yours.

God's law is this you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and you shall love your neighbour as yourself. And what that means is that when he assesses my every day there will be crimes on it and the list will be very very long and it will go on and on.

And at the end of it perhaps you can imagine him saying heavenly judge this one is mine. This comes this one comes with me through this door. This door out of the courtroom marked hell.

[20 : 53] And that would be the case wouldn't it if it were not for the fact that there is another lawyer a counsel for the defence. And for the Christian he will say this he will approach the bench perhaps you can imagine it and say this Father we do not contest this list of crimes it is all true but Father and here perhaps he might show the marks in his hands and the the wound in his side but Father it is all paid for and you are too just to punish any sin twice.

This one is mine and comes with me not through the door marked hell but the door marked heaven. Do you want the love of God that is effective?

Do you want the love of God that is unique? Finally do we want the love of God that is deeply personal? We started by saying didn't we that we need love and we need relationship and what the Bible is saying is that in Jesus Christ we are called back into relationship with God and 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.

Why? So that we can know him. The Bible is saying that at the heart of the universe before it began and after time is over there will be a relationship a love relationship I wonder if that's ever struck you that is why the Bible describes God as the Holy Trinity perfect relationship between God the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit a relationship of such perfect love but it's overflowed to you and to me in sending Jesus who came to this earth to die for me so that I can be brought back into that relationship forever to partake in perfect love in other words he wants me home that's where I want to end really with this question do you want to come home do we want to come home to God's love for Christians are we rejoicing in that if we're not yet

Christians do we want to the story told of a young girl who grew up in the southern USA in the early 20th century and she was the daughter of respectable parents brought her up fairly strictly but I think kindly anyway you can't guarantee what happens in any life can you and any family life and this girl rebelled she went for drink first of all in her early teens and then for drugs and obviously sex outside marriage at an early age and then to crime to feed her drug habit and as time went on obviously her relationship with her parents really fell apart and she only really turned to them for money as time went on and for help when she was in real trouble and they thought nothing could get worse until the day that she went missing and they heard nothing about her for quite a long time and then and then they heard through a confused source that she'd slipped out of the USA over the border into Mexico because she'd made the state too hot to hold her and they heard nothing from her and they were distraught as you would be they went to Mexico they went to Mexico City they looked around for her they put her photo up they went to the embassy and they found nothing and they found nothing that year and they heard nothing of her for a year for two years for several years for such a time as they thought they would give up looking for her emotionally they were beginning to give up inside save that her mother decided that she'd have one last go so she went back to Mexico and she went back to Mexico City and she went round again putting posters up a picture a picture of her daughter and her hugging each other in happier times and underneath just a little message all around the city wherever she could bars streets poster boards police stations and one night in one seedy back street in one seedy little bar there sat a woman who should have been a young woman but no longer looked young and she looked at the poster and she looked at the picture and she looked at the phone number and she saw the loving face and she read the message which said to her wherever you are whatever you've done come home and she did and the question all the Bible is asking us is this have we will we will we come home to him who wants us to come home to him well I think we're going to have a break in a minute and you might like to ask questions about that and then later on

[26 : 14] I'm just going to give you an opportunity to pray a prayer with me about coming home to him after we've had questions if you'd like to so be aware that I'm going to do that but you might like to think now about anything you want to ask about what we've said so I'd like to pray a prayer and it's a prayer in three parts and forgive me for being very potsy but it's ABC okay I think if you want to come home to God it is as simple as this it's a matter of admitting that I am a sinner and I need forgiving just the same as that thief on the cross did just the same as the genocide perpetrators I might have not done it so dramatically but I'm a sinner I need forgiving B believing that Jesus did die on the cross in my place that he's paid for all my sins past present and future that everything is gone that he's taken my penalty so that I can know God believing and then C coming to him coming to him to live in a love relationship with him coming home to him coming to him knowing that it will mean handing my life over to him whatever the cost of that is whatever it's going to do to my reputation whatever it's going to do to my desire to live my life my own way coming to him to live in a love relationship forever in which

I live his way because I love him and I love him because he first loved me so ABC you may not be ready for that if you're not I warmly urge you to think about Christianity Explored it's a course we run over in Tooting it's a great course and it gives you the opportunity to ask the things you want to ask and say the things you want to say apart from anything else doesn't it important thing to be able to do but if you are ready you might like to think about praying this prayer with me I'm going to once just to read it out and then I'm going to pray it out loud a second time so that you can join in this is the prayer I'm just reading it out now so don't join in at this stage this is just so you know what it is heavenly father I admit that I am a sinner I have not loved you I have grabbed your gifts and ignored you I have dirtied the life you've given me I rightly deserve your punishment but I believe that Jesus

Christ has died on the cross to pay the penalty for all my sins so that I can be acquitted in your court and know your forgiveness from this day on and so I want to come to you to come home and to live the rest of my life and eternity in a love relationship with you because I love you in Jesus name Amen I'm going to pray that now just join in in the quiet of your hearts if you'd like to certainly don't if you're not ready for it but if you are join with me heavenly father I admit that I am a sinner I have not loved you I have grabbed your gifts and ignored you I have dirtied the life you've given me and I rightly deserve your punishment but I believe that Jesus Christ has died on the cross to pay the penalty for all my sins so that I can be acquitted in your court and know your forgiveness from this day on and so I want to come to you to come home to live the rest of my life and eternity in a love relationship with you help me to learn to live step by step in your way because I love you in Jesus name amen