

In This is Love

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[0 : 00] Well, let's pray while we're standing. Heavenly Father, we praise you that you have not left us alone in this world, that you sent your Son to seek after us, to seek the lost.

Thank you so much, Father, that you gave us your Word so that we're not left guessing after you, feeling after you blindly, but that you've shown yourself in your Son.

And the apostles have recorded this and passed on faithfully. What your Son did, what he taught, and the implications of that teaching. Please help us tonight, Lord, to learn again that new but ever old commandment that your Son taught, to love as he loved us.

For we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Would you please have a seat? First of all, I should apologize that I'm not Paul Barker.

I'm sorry I'm not Paul Barker, but I'm not sorry I am Michael Flynn, so it's a paradox there. Also, I want to apologize that I'm told just when I came in that you're used to receiving a lecture on the text.

[1 : 13] I'm not a lecturer by trade, I'm a preacher by trade. So when Paul asked me to speak, I presumed that he meant that I'd be giving you a sermon. So that's what I've prepared and that's what I'll deliver. However, I will allow time for questions after the talk, if that's helpful to you.

So if you've got pen and paper there and you think of something you want to ask while I'm speaking, make sure you note that down so that you can remember it later on. And I'll get someone who actually knows the answer to answer the questions.

It'll be really helpful if you had those Black Pew Bibles open at page 991.

We're looking at verse 7 of chapter 4. Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. I find it so hard to talk about love.

[2 : 19] And I find it so hard because I know many older people look at the divorce rate amongst their children. As grandparents, often they've been hurt or inherited extra work because of the messiness that's going on in the generation down from them.

They often ask the question, why didn't they stick at it? Why didn't they work harder? What happened to the love? I know many older people look around at society and think sometimes, well, look, there's so many terrible crimes happening now, things that were seldom heard about years ago.

Everything seems so dominated by money. Sports and politics and business are driven by those considerations. Decisions now are not about love or loyalty or service.

They're old-fashioned notions. They're all unprofitable. Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

Those who are a bit younger will remember that in the 1960s, the Beatles taught all you need is love. Love to solve all the massive problems of humankind, all those personal, social, international problems.

[3 : 38] But somewhere along the way, a lot of people got hurt. Wars continued. Famines came. Famines went. Instead of love being a commitment to someone else's good, love gradually became to mean a use.

So by the time we got to the 1970s, Tina Turner and other pop stars like that were writing songs about what has love got to do with it? Love's a feeling you feel about someone for a while.

And you can fall out of love now. And that excuses us from breaking all sorts of promises and dropping all sorts of responsibilities. And saddest, I think, and most subtle of all, is that love has come to mean tolerance.

Leave him alone. Let him find his own path, his own truth. We won't interfere. We'll abandon them. It was a bit disillusioning, I think, for the generation going through the 60s and 70s because love didn't solve the world's problems.

And so what we've done now is shrunk what we mean by love down to just those really special personal relationships and maybe even just for a time in those special personal relationships.
[5 : 00] So we go see a film like Love Actually. And it's not talking about changing the world. It's just talking about how maybe just for a moment, maybe just for a time we can find something that looks like love in our most intimate relationships.

It's funny, isn't it? We live in an age of information. I often wonder what it would be like to live in an age of love. I'd be very curious. But in the reading that we had read to us before, John says that God's people are a people of love.

They are a people of what God means by love. Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. Now, as you'll know, having gone through one John with Paul over the last little while, you'll be aware that John uses strong language. He draws distinctions between people who are Christian and people who are no longer Christian. And this is what makes John's letter so difficult and so different to other letters in the New Testament.

[6 : 23] So we can read a letter like Galatians, and there's a doctrinal issue going on there. Someone is adding to the cross a religious ceremony, circumcision in the case of the letter to the Galatians.

And Paul uses strong language, but he still thanks God for the faith of the Galatians. We can think about Paul's letter to the Corinthians, all their messy moral and political issues.

I often wonder when I get to the end of one Corinthians, was there really a church of God in Corinth, given what was going on in Corinth? But Paul opens the letter by saying, to the church of God in Corinth, I thank God for these things that are happening amongst you.

He thanks God for their faith. He says that they are the fruit of his ministry. So most of the letters that we have in the New Testament are like the letters to the churches in the book of Revelation. They're written to people who are basically still Christian. They're written to people where errors of life or errors of doctrine have crept in, and they needed to be corrected before they missed the mark altogether.

[7 : 37] A bit like when I was growing up and we all got excited by the Apollo moon missions. If you were wrong by one half of one degree as you left Earth, well, you'd miss the moon by many, many miles.

But when John writes this letter, it's too late. It's too late when John writes this letter.

The mark has been missed. People have crossed the line. People have given up on Jesus as the Christ, God come to us in human flesh, God with us.

That's why in the previous chapter, John's been using strong language. He calls them antichrists, false prophets. He wants the churches to understand that though Christianity may be a broad field, it does have boundaries.

Though God loves diversity, there's still a point where you cease to be a Christian. One of the lines that's been crossed by these antichrists, these false prophets, wasn't only in their doctrine, their teaching about who Jesus was and is.

[8 : 57] One of the lines they crossed was the line of love. They were probably still using the language of love, a bit like we still use the language of love today in our media, in our entertainment industry.

But the word love had changed its content. It had changed its meaning. And that's why John spends this time in this chapter defining what it really means. It's really important.

This is really important because if we change what God means by love, then effectively we give up on the Bible, the God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, the God of Jesus Christ, the God who has shown himself to be faithful love.

So what does God mean by love? Is it a feeling? Is it a commitment you take on for a little while then drop later? Look at verse 9.

God's love was revealed among us in this way. God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

[10 : 19] This is love. This is love. This is love acting, interfering. Love doesn't leave us alone.

Love seeks us out. It wrestles with us, dies for us, even when we didn't want it to, even when we didn't recognize our own need, even when we're ungrateful, even when we were enemies of God. You remember that John said in chapter 2 that God loved the world. You think about what else John says about the world in this letter. The world is full of idols.

The world is full of temptations. The world is a thing to avoid. God loved what hated him. God loved. And this is love, not that we loved him, we didn't, but he loved us. God's a lover. He's persistent. We didn't even know how to want love.

[11 : 23] We were too proud, perhaps too blind, cynical, hurt, shy. I can speak like that because I wasn't raised in a Christian family.

I remember what it's like to be totally ignorant of the love of God, as most of the people outside these walls are today. We needed to be shown what love looked like.

We needed to be told what the word actually meant. And then we needed to be assisted to live a life like that, a life of love.

And we needed, above all, to be forgiven when we failed. Love. So he sent his son, that we might live through him, have a relationship with him, be changed to be like him.

It's such an important point that John is making here, and particularly important for us, because in so much of our thinking about love in the church, we get this wrong. I keep on running into this idea that a loving God who requires an attorney sacrifice for our sins, a holy God who wants to be with us and save us from what we've become, is wrong.

[12 : 50] Not too many years ago, the leader of my own denomination said, it was immoral to think that an innocent man should die for the guilty. It was immoral to think that Jesus Christ should be put to death for sinners.

Maybe so, if Jesus Christ was only a Jew in the first century. But he wasn't. Jesus Christ was he who was from the beginning.

John's told us that, isn't he? Jesus Christ was life. He says that in the opening verses of this letter he's written. He's trying to make it as plain as possible.

Here is God. Come to us in his son. And he died willingly. He died willingly.

He died for a world that was against him and hated him. He died for a world that was against him. It's stunning, isn't it, when you start to unpack what this love actually looks like.

[13 : 55] You have a love of God that verges on being immoral because you have the innocent suffering for the guilty. You have a love of God that is so outrageous it will pick up the people who hate it.

Can you imagine that in our family situations just for a moment? I know some of you will have perfect families. I'm afraid I don't. But can you imagine that? Those people we haven't spoken to for years.

Those people who we're deeply alienated from and want nothing to do with us. Lay down your life for that. That's what God means by love.

That's what God means by sacrifice. So when we hear a talk in the church that love means to be tolerant or to love people is to live and let live or to let people get on with whatever moral or lifestyle choices that they've made and assure that they're okay because God's going to love them regardless.

That's not what God means by love. In fact, if I'm thinking theologically that's what God means by judgment. To be tolerant and just to leave someone alone.

[15 : 28] To have nothing to do with them. To drop them in their own devices and just leave them there. That's not love. That's what the New Testament calls hell. To be left alone in our own moral mess without the challenge of his word or the help of his spirit or the encouragement of his saints.

Ouch. What God means by love is seeking us out even when we didn't want him, paying for our sins, wooing us back into a relationship with him and then gradually, patiently, changing our lives, healing our wounds, disciplining our pride until finally at the end when we see him face to face we will be changed to be like him.

The long process but that is what God means by love. Some years ago I was driving home late with my family and it was raining very hard and we were working up in the Dandenongs and it's very hard to see on the roads when it's at night in the Dandenongs particularly when it's raining.

The roads have lots of sharp curves and I remember coming around a very familiar curve and they're right in the middle of the road wearing a dark brown dry as a bone coat so you could barely

pick her out in the headlights was a young woman and she was blind drunk.

I managed to swerve around her because there's no way I could have braked in time and just missed her. There were three young men I saw out of the corner of my eye on the side of the road also blind drunk laughing.

[16:59] Now as it turns out I knew this woman. I knew that at the time when I nearly ran her over she was 17 years old. I knew when she was 14 she'd had an abortion.

I knew that she'd had actual nightmares and ongoing guilt about that that she worked really hard to deny. I knew that at 16 she'd attempted suicide I knew that she had had a very promiscuous lifestyle with relationship after relationship broken up in this futile search for love.

She was desperate for love this girl and she couldn't find it and I knew her family her parents were married they were well to do and they operated with this sort of 1960s definition of free love.

For them love meant tolerance endless tolerance. For them love just meant a blank check do what's good for you we won't interfere get on with it. That's our philosophy of parenting and that's what they did.

You know and I pulled in the driveway that evening my heart was still pounding like this and I glanced in the mirror at my three daughters who were asleep on the back seat they were very small and cute at that stage or big now and I thought that free love that endless tolerance which that young woman had grown up under really was just another form of hate.

[18:30] I couldn't imagine letting one of my girls do what this girl was doing and still claim to love them as their father. You can understand why she was confused can't you?

Because she'd been told all her life freedom is the loving thing to do and that love really didn't exist in her experience it was only a word.

I thought if only her parents had sought her out if only her parents were anxiously driving around the streets on that rainy night waking up the neighbors getting people out of bed helping them to look for their daughter knocking on the door of the police station if only her parents were involved enough to see the hurt and the confusion and the desperation that tolerance and freedom had cost her if only her parents had given up their pride to give her the rounds of the kitchen.

You know she came home that night wouldn't have been great if her parents said you are grounded young girl and reminded her that life is not only about freedom but it's also about responsibility that she was worth more than the abuse she was allowing to be dealt out to her now she would have hated the discipline wouldn't she?

She would have resented the interference she would have kicked and screamed and threatened she would have planned to move out but she would have also known that she was worth something to someone that there was someone worried about her someone angry at her someone who loved her my parents had embarrassed themselves for me they'd taken risks for me spent time money anxiety prayers searching for me they'd disciplined me she would have known she was loved not because someone said it or was tolerant of her but because someone did it and John's point is very simply that's what God's done despite our rebellion despite our confusion despite our being drunk with sin and anti-God self-destructive addictions God's embarrassed himself for us he left the distance of eternity to seek us out in the dark streets of this world to call us to repent to call us to salvation and the cost of buying us back from what we had sold ourselves into he bore only two beings in this universe could do it could bear the price of sin the people who had sinned or the person who made the rules the person who was sinned against

[21:21] God and his only son died to bring us home to change us to love us and not to leave us so it's not just love so that you can be what you are it's love so that you can become like Christ it's a demanding love it's a free love but it's a demanding love beloved since God loved us so much he says in verse 11 we also ought to love one another in the same way you see no one has ever seen God if we love one another God lives in us and his love is perfected in us the effect you see of being well loved is that we become loving that if we know God that is if we hang out like him hang out with him then we'll be like him if people look at us and say you see that woman just absolutely hopeless family characteristics see what she's doing that's just that's just what her heavenly father would do pathetic isn't it or glorious isn't it if we hang out with love we get changed to become that way we get changed into love we're seen to be children of God you remember that John wrote in his gospel that Jesus went as far as to say that they will know that you are my followers by how you love each other here in the church that this is a community that demonstrates what God means by love and

I've got to tell you when you see a church that knows how to love the way God loves well you're seeing God at work aren't you you're seeing God completing his work in us and it's so attractive it's incredibly attractive we run these courses at St Jude's they're called Believe Belong Grow and Serve the Believe course isn't a sort of evangelistic course where we seek to reach out to people the Belong course is a course for people who are considering joining the church and want to find out a little bit more about what we believe and the Grow course is for growing up and serving is to sort of plug in to do different things around the place but what we've found in our experience is we've got the order of the courses around the wrong way so we have non-Christian people coming to the belong course why are they coming to the belong course because they want to belong and if they can see the love that is going on between

God's people and I know as people who live with other Christian people we get used to it and we don't see it but people who are coming in from the world if I can put it that way see it starkly simple things you invite somebody back for a meal after church that is unheard of that sort of hospitality you lend someone your lawnmower where does that happen I mean to us it looks like nothing but to other people for goodness sake these people really love each other don't they it's so attractive in a world that is cynical about love in a world that's starving I think for what God means by love but can't believe that love exists anymore I think there can be no better argument for Christ than a church full of the love of God we need to bear with each other in all our controversies and disagreements we need to seek each other out we need to encourage each other to lead lives that are worthy of this for God is love and that love meant an atoning sacrifice for our sins and that's the love we're called to

God showed his love by sending his son so we could live out that same practical love verse 13 by this we know that we abide in him and he in us because he has given us of his spirit and we have seen and do testify that the father has sent his son as the savior of the world God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the son of God and they abide in God it's often said in the church it's certainly been said in the recent past that there were two Christs there's the Christ of history and the Christ of faith there's the Jesus who really lived in Palestine 2000 years ago and then there's the Jesus who the church prays to experience now I guess in recent years people have tried to drive a wedge between the Jesus of history and the experience of

Jesus and they often say that they're not related that you don't need to believe the historical evidence about Christianity to actually experience the risen Lord Jesus for example people have been anxious to divorce the Jesus of history from the Jesus of experience because they can then say that our faith does not depend on is not based upon things that happened that your experience of faith is really the same as the experience of the Hindu or the Muslim the Buddhist or the spiritualist it's all the same spirit it's been expressed just in different forms different traditions and so would go the liberal argument in the church well John says here quite plainly that idea is profoundly wrong that a sign of the spirit of God at work in the church is to actually take us back to to believe in the apostles witness about the son of

[27 : 52] God this is what the spirit does in us we know we abide in him and he in us because he's given us of his spirit and we've seen and do testify that the father has sent his son as the savior of the world God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the son of God and they abide in God you see the antichrist the false prophets of John's day only wanted the Christ of faith not of history they didn't want the Jesus that the apostles wrote about because that would mean they have to change they couldn't change Christ to suit their own ideas they didn't want a Christ who would be the savior of the world because they didn't want to believe in the reality of sin we saw that in chapter one didn't we we didn't want a Jesus who was also the

Christ the son of God because then his words his teaching his actions they must be taken seriously wouldn't they his words his deeds would become ultimate determining words and deeds if he was truly God become man for John of course the Christ of faith is the Christ of history experience in history the spirit's witness and the son's mission the lives we live and the truth we believe have to go together they have to be joined together and we see this in everyday experience I think particularly if we do evangelism I was a chaplain for a little while at a secondary school and I remember at one stage we had an outreach event went for a week and I turned up totally lacking in any faith basically

I thought the last day we invited people who thought they wanted to become Christians to come along and we wouldn't have any fancy games no wild stuff happening we would just be sitting in this

portable and if you wanted to talk about becoming a Christian then sure you can become a Christian I was driving there thought there'll be nobody there when I got there it was packed it was the biggest day we'd had we didn't find any gimmicks no games nothing we just sat and had these discussions and at the end of it we had 28 young men and women commit themselves to the Lord there was he was a real toughie he stood up and he started telling everybody that he found this Bible and he started reading it and he couldn't put it down and then he started praying and he couldn't stop and I was sitting there thinking yeah God's at work here why was I thinking that because here is the spirit of God taking this young man back to the word of God the teaching of the prophets and the apostles taking this young man back to the historical Jesus so that he could experience and know the living Lord Jesus now and have his life changed which Jesus was this young man placing his faith in the Jesus of faith or the Jesus of history it was the Jesus that John had seen and testified to that this was the son sent by the father this was the savior of the world that this young man hoped in so a sign of the spirit says John is holding to truth by this we know that we're able to abide in him and he and us because he has given us of his spirit and we have seen and do testify that the father has sent his son as the savior of the world God abides in those who but the gospel is a gospel of love isn't it it's not just about the facts of what happened and what we believe so John goes on so we have known and believe the love that God has for us God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them love has been perfected among us in this that we may have boldness on the day of judgment because as he is so are we in this world there is no fear in love but perfect love casts out fear for fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love we love because he first loved us those who say I love God and hate their brothers and sisters are liars for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen the commandment we have from him is this those who love

[33 : 01] God must love their brothers and sisters also love and hate grow in two very different types of soil I think the soil of hate John says here is fertilized by fear the soil of love is fertilized by confidence or some people translate it boldness or security or belonging it's the same word behind fear behind hate sorry is fear and that fear is ultimately fear of judgment it's insecurity it's the fear of failure the fear of I guess low prestige the fear of the future fear of living a meaningless life fear of being shamed it represents all these sort of mini judgments that we suffer in our own eyes and perhaps in the eyes of others as well tastes of the final judgment

I don't know for those of you who perhaps read biographies about the tyrants of the last century you'll understand what's going on here those men were often very insecure in themselves they actually were very fearful men and that fear often drove and empowered their evil in my experience people will go to enormous lengths to avoid the reality of their words or the reality of their actions becoming known we'll duck we'll weave we'll twist we'll deny we'll fool ourselves for a time and perhaps some people I know I think have fooled themselves for a lifetime and we all face the fear of one day being found out of being exposed of being humbled and it's no wonder the New Testament writers call the day of judgment they're liking it to a day of fire when all the dross is burnt off and what we're really made of is finally seen see all the day of judgment is that one day everybody will see what was really done what was really said who we really are and for a lot of people that is terrifying but love the soil of love is full of confidence confidence to face the day of judgment confidence confidence because there's signs of love at work in us confidence because in this world we're becoming like him we are living lives that reflect the wisdom the compassion the love of Jesus of Nazareth love love the last time I preached at St Jude's just before I went on annual leave a couple of weeks ago after the service I had this man come up to me and just about break my heart really by saying you know I don't even want to be godly that's just right out of my court I can't do that I know I'm not a godly man I'm not there I just want to know if I've made it over the line I just want to know if I'm in the kingdom I told him I was really glad he was worried about it because the people in 1 John who weren't worried about it were the ones who weren't in the kingdom I told him that your confidence is not based on how much like

Christ you are because some of us quite frankly have to start a long way back your confidence is that we love because he first loved us that's your confidence that it was too much for us to reach out we were so shut up in ourselves but love reached out to us to produce love in us will you let God now produce love in you will you now let God please begin to make you into a godly man because he loves you you know when a baby is born and they've come out of that enclosed environment and

that warmth and the regular beat of mum's heart and the sound of mum's breath and there's pain they're scared they're insecure they're crying and their fists have that automatic clenching reaction and I think all of us are like that to some extent all of us need to be taken and held and loved until the crying stops until the fear goes the fist unclenches and God can put into our open hands a gift of love and being able to love it's very hard to love unless you are secure isn't it that you are loved as well it's very hard for us to give what we haven't already got we know that behind acts of hatred lurks fear that John is saying and we often try to understand why people do terrible things by looking at the fears that motivate them we make lots of write detective novels about it and make all sorts of horrible films and series on television about what motivates people to do these acts of hatred these evil things the poor upbringing the abuse of the past the threats to security the threats to wealth the things that can make whole nations do terrible things and what

God does with all of that with all of those things that look so difficult to us to change is that he first loves us and then as we grasp that love more he works in us more until our fear fades and we become open not closed confident not insecure love produces love in us that's why John says we cannot claim to know God if we hate our brothers and sisters in the church we cannot claim to know God who is love if we hate what he loves and that's his church and I have met too many people far too many people who are so critical of the church they've been isolated in their religion they do their faith alone they lack any respect for leadership in the church or the people of a congregation they run down they're uncomfortable when they're with them they offer no help to them they'll ignore them or work against them and yet they claim to know

[40 : 47] God well they claim to be more Christian than the Christians quote unquote I think according to John they're lying in this letter John returns to the same themes over and over again I like calling it a spiral bound book because he'll talk about the same ideas but come back at them at a slightly different level at a slightly different angle and each time he wants to take us deeper and deeper into these ideas particularly into the old but ever new command to love he wants us to hold to the truth about Jesus Christ and the love the signs of God's presence by his spirit that that truth produces in us you've got to remember that he's writing this to a divided and confused church a church that's lost confidence in both the history of what

God has done in Jesus Christ and the experience of what God in Jesus Christ is doing in their lives now that sounds a little bit too much like a denomination I know it breaks your heart sometimes to hear of the people of God being told it didn't happen you know but it doesn't matter you can still have some sort of experience of Jesus and it doesn't really matter how you live as long as you're tolerant of other people you know doing whatever they want to do because well that's what Jesus would want that's feeding the children of God stones isn't it that's not giving them the bread of the word that's the message of the false prophet that's the message of the antichrists according to John no says

John God wants us to know him in his son Jesus of Nazareth who is the son of God no says John God wants us to be changed by that love shall we pray