God is Love

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Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[0:00] I'm going to be reading this morning from 1 John chapter 3 and chapter 4. So we'll begin with 1 John chapter 3 verse 1 and then we'll turn to 1 John 4 verse 8.

1 John 3 verse 1.
See what kind of love the Father has given to us that we should be called children of God and so we are.
The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. And then in 1 John 4 verse 8.
1 John 4 verse 8.
[1:24] 1 John 4 verse 9.

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[2:54] 2 John 5. 2 John 5. But let's not think that understanding God's love and that God is love is something that is easy to do.

It's tempting to hear some people say, well, loving is easy, you just love and God is love. I don't think it's quite as easy as that. I don't think so many Christians would have so many questions regarding whether or not God loves them.
In difficult circumstances, if love were easy to understand. Perhaps for men, it's not so much the understanding which causes them the problem, but the feeling, the experience of love.
Then you have the added complications of perhaps growing up where you got used to not feeling love. And therefore, it no longer bothers you not to feel what love feels like.
Now, that may not be right, but it's most definitely real. So the idea that love is something that is easy to understand, I'm not going to buy into that.
[4:11] I just don't think it is the case. I think love is difficult. I think God's love is difficult to explain. It's difficult to truly appreciate and understand because of the difficulties that we have in the world.

And often because we define God's love like human love by linking it to something. You know, love is when this happens and love is when this doesn't happen.
The trouble is, is when we sort of elevate that to God's level, it doesn't work because God's love cannot be understood in that way. So I want to be able to make it through this morning.
And I want you to go out of the church here this morning and know that God loves you. But more importantly, I want you to know that God loves you because God is love. Okay, this is the most important thing to convey to you this morning, that God is love, hence why he's able to love you.
But I want to recognize that if you're struggling with that, I'm right on board with you. It's possible to guard your heart from experiencing love because of what love reveals.
[5:24] It reveals identity, you know, it tells truth. And that's not always easy to take. This means that there's no room here this morning for speculation.

There's no room for guesswork. There's no room for I think it might be. Or it could be this. Or it could be that. When we're tackling with something like God being love, we're going to have to be very careful about every word that we're about to say.
And the reason being is because we don't want to limit it down to a human form of love. And neither do we want to make the mistake of it being the wrong kind of reflected love.
What I mean by that is, is that it could be quite tempting for someone like me, who never knew my father, who never knew what fatherly love is like, to then say, how could God be a loving father?

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That would be, it would be understandable, but it would be completely wrong. Because we're taking a human environment, a human circumstance, a human reflection, and then sending it upwards as though this has something to do with what God is like.
[6:40] That happens a lot, but it's not the way that you'll actually get to know God and him loving you. So we begin with a summary, chapter 3, verse 1 in 1 John.

And John is causing us to see what kind of love it is that the Father has given to us in order to make us children of God. He's asking us to pay great attention to divine love in a world where no doubt there are other types of love.
The reason he's asking you to pay attention to it is because God's love is not something that you know. It's not something that you are used to. And it's only something that you begin to know and you begin to get used to the moment you become a Christian.
Also, God's love is not something that you automatically have amongst each other. It's something that matures in a congregation after years and years. And it's hard to demonstrate because God by nature is love.
We're not. We can be loving, but we cannot be love. And God by nature is love. And the benefit of knowing this, the importance of knowing this is so great in Advent of the sending of Christ that you've probably already made the connection.
[8:07] Well, John is writing this letter because he wants Christians to know that God loves them. But he also wants them to know what that love accomplishes. That by the very fact that God has set his love upon you, he has made you children of God.

That out of that love, he decided to send his son into the world to accomplish making you children of God. This means that God's love is effectual.
This is where it becomes perhaps a little bit difficult to understand compared to reciprocal love that we enjoy amongst humans.
Reciprocal love is this, that if I love you, you, out of feeling compelled to love me back perhaps, will love me back with an action.
So love can quickly deteriorate into a tit-for-tat. It can quickly deteriorate into a reciprocation where because this person has done this for me, I must therefore do it for them.
[9:13] The Christian does not love God because the Christian considers how much God loves them. That's not the way that it works. That's not the way that it ever works.

It's as though we sit here and we consider how much God has done for us in Christ Jesus. That as we weigh up all of those things, we then reciprocate that kind of love back. That's not the way that it works.
It's as though our love is simply a response to God's love. I think if you read 1 John carefully and I think if you read, for instance, the whole of Scripture, what you'll learn is that God's love is effectual. Meaning that when God loves you, he includes in that love the ability for you to be able to love him back properly.
That God's love is so effectual that it means that you will live an obedient life because God's love is creating that in you. Your obedient life isn't you reflecting on what God has done and then you live that because look at what God has done for me.
[10:20] No, no. Effectual love is that for some reason you have this burning desire within you, however difficult it is, to come back to God. That there's something that draws you in to praying even when you don't want to pray.

That's the effectual love of God. That there's something that causes you to follow Jesus even when it's really difficult. That's the effectual love of God. It's not about you considering how much God has done for you and then what would be the right response.
No, no. God's love is effectual. It means that in it, he includes the provisions by which he expects us to live a blessed and faithful life.
But he doesn't leave that up to us. He includes that within the love that he gives to us. It's effectual. It creates those things within us. Human love is reciprocal.
That's why you can love a person and not be loved back. Because your love cannot necessarily create in them that effectualness that causes them to love you back.
[11:31] Because they might love you out of guilt. They might love you out of the fact that you've done all of this for them that they can't leave you at this time. Right? I've, you know, I've been in the world, perhaps not long as some of you, but longer than some of you.

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And I understand how relationships work. And I've met a few people even when we're sharing the gospel with them. And I've, you know, you see couples that are together before Christmas and they're not together after Christmas.
And when you get to the bottom of why that happened, it's not because Christmas was necessarily a particularly stressful point. It was because I can't leave before Christmas.
Right? Right? What you're responding in a way where people are loving each other, but then that love is then measured. I can love them back to this extent, but their love for me cannot make me love them back.
It's what I choose to give. So human love is such a poor quality compared to God's love, which is effectual, which can actually create in us a love for God back to him.
[12:41] It provides the necessary ingredients to live obediently, to live faithfully. Our love for one another can actually do that. It simply becomes a reciprocal arrangement whereby I will love them back to the extent that they love me.

I may not go any further. I might because I'm more loving than them. But then this is a choice that I'm making in and of myself. Human love is terribly complicated.
And it's such a poor quality compared to the love that God gives to us. So God's love is an effectual love.
It's not easy to understand, I appreciate, but absolutely vital to understand. In 1 John 4.8, we have this phrase that God is love.
In other words, we're not talking about actions now. We're talking about the nature and character of God. That if God didn't do anything, if God didn't send his son into the world to save sinners, God would still be love.
[13:48] And this is perhaps where the second difficulty comes in because we're not used to thinking of love in terms of existing separate from an action.

But what 1 John is teaching us is that because God is love, he is love whether he does anything or doesn't do anything. It's in his very nature to be love.
He is love. Now, we get to experience that love by God sending his son into the world. We get to know what that love is. But this is why it's so important.
God is love. And therefore, as we reflect on Advent, we understand that if God is love, then at some point in human history, God has to enter this world.
Why do I say that? Well, put it this way. If God is love and God is going to love this world, what has to come? God.
[14:57] Okay? If God is love and God is going to love this world, what has to come? God has to come. Advent is where God comes.

Advent, as we have sung, is where love comes down. So the very birth of Christ is the very coming of God. It is love in this world in its strictest and proper sense.
So God cannot love this world without coming. Do you understand? God cannot love this world without sending himself into this world out of his own choice of love.
Because God is love, he makes the choice to come. And he makes the choice to come because if the world is going to know love, it can only know love if it knows God.
God is love. And therefore, if God is going to love this world, then God is going to have to come to this world. And that's what Advent is. Advent is when love came to this world.
[16:05] If God is going to love us, then God is going to have to come. Well, what then is this love? Well, I don't want you to go away with being unsure about what God's love is.

So we have to make at least some ground here this morning. And the first thing to say is that God's love is not a better version of human love. It's an entirely different kind of love altogether.
Christian love, that is, reflecting God's love, mirrors it. It should mirror it as best that it can. But it will never be like God who is love by definition, by his nature and character.
We can say that the reasons that God loves us, because God is love, are not found in us. They're found in him. And that's really important for you to understand. I often make the joke, and I've said this a few years, often around the time of Christmas, the illustration of, you know, if I love my wife because her hair looked great, then what happens on the day, I've got to be careful, what happens on the day when it doesn't look great?
Right? If I love her for a particular reason, what happens when that reason is no longer there? If I love my wife because she's a particular dress size, and her dress size changes, what happens with

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my love for her?
[17:31] Right? In other words, if I love her for the reasons that are found in her, and those reasons in her change, then she's smart enough to figure out, right, he's going to go off me.

He's not going to love me. Right? That's the way, that's the poor quality of human love. That's the, it's such a poor quality of love, isn't it?
That it would be tied up with those kind of superficial changes. This is why when God loves us, he loves us because he chooses to love us out of the fact that he is love.
There's a wonderful example in Deuteronomy. I'll read it to you. He says, God is explaining to his people why he loves them, and they're not quick at getting it, and we're not quick either.
He says, it's not because you were more in number than all the other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you. For, in fact, you were the fewest of all peoples.
[18:28] But it is because the Lord loves you. In other words, God is saying that the reason I love you is because I'm love.

The reason I love you is because I am, by definition, love. So he's saying, listen, I don't love you because you're great. I don't love you because you're wonderful.
I don't love you because you're lovable. But then, neither do I love you because you're not great, or you're not wonderful, or you're not lovable. The reason I love you is because I choose to love you.
And because God is love, therefore, the love that we receive is not dependent on how we are before him, which means that we can live our life, and it can fluctuate up and down, perhaps rapidly, and God's love upon us remains the same because God remains the same.
Human love can't even get close to that. As we bathe, as it were, as we sit back and just rest in the fact that God loves you, I mean really loves you, now we begin to understand that guilt, that we perhaps felt for some things, begin to disappear because there's no reason to hold on to it.
[19:49] God can't love me as much as that person because of this or that. But that's not how God's love works. That's how, perhaps, your love works. But it's not how God's love works.

It's a circular argument in many respects. God loves you because he loves you just because he loves you. Every reason God has for loving you is found in him.
Every reason. That should give you such an assurance. And don't feel as though, oh, can I feel bad about myself that I'm not good enough, that that's the way love has to be.
Don't send yourself on that kind of trip. We struggle to understand this, I think, because human love doesn't work like that. Human love fluctuates, and human love is often tied to something else.
In other words, I know you love me if you... And I know you're not loving me if you... We try to determine what love looks like by what it's tied to.
[21:02] And that's not how God's love is. But at the same time, how do we know that God loves us? Well, because there are definite actions that come from the heart of God.

He does send his son. He does set his love upon us. His son does die on the cross, taking our sin upon himself. He does rise from the grave.
He does make promises that he'll come again. He does, at this moment, sit hand at the right hand of the father, upon high, reigning at this very moment. Right?
All of which is assurance to us that God loves us. God doesn't stop loving us. God doesn't fall out of love with us.
He's not prone to those kind of weaknesses that human love is so prone to. God's love for you doesn't change because it's based on a very important theological truth that God doesn't change.
[22:03] God doesn't change. And therefore, if God is love, God's love doesn't change either. God cannot be loving one day and not loving another day.

That cannot happen because God cannot be God one day and not God another day. This is the benefit of knowing what the love of God is.
God is God. God is always God. And therefore, God's love is always the same. And God has decided at Christmas, or what we call Christmas, at Advent, to set that love upon you.
And when God loves you, what it means is that he is sharing himself with you. Everything that God has, he shares with you, and that's the act of love.
He's giving himself to you. He's not giving you something. He's giving you himself. So what are the difficulties then that we have to overcome?
[23:15] Well, we have to understand that God's love doesn't have the same kind of links that human love has. Sometimes we want to think of God's love as being the absence of suffering and

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the presence of blessing.

And we tend to think that perhaps God's love for us fluctuates by how much blessing we receive in the absence of how much suffering we don't have to go through. Now I know how much God loves me.
I once, only a week or so ago, was reading this account of a lady who had her husband taken away from her. who was a Christian pastor and he was taking away and she was, she went before, I forget which country it was now, is not too long ago.
When it happened, it was a fairly long time ago, but when I was reading the account, it wasn't that long ago. And it was put to her, well, your husband can come back, he can come out of prison, he can come out of being persecuted, all he has to do is just, just not follow Christ anymore.
And then you can have your husband back. And her response was, okay, but I don't want a coward for a husband. Keep in there. Is she loving her husband?
[24:39] Like, sometimes, love, what is love meant to look like? And we tend to associate it with some things and not associate it with other things.

God sent his son who died on a cross. What does love look like? God's son suffered, took our sin upon himself. What does love look like?
So before we can make any kind of measurement of whether or not God loves us, we have to at least ask the question, what does God's love actually look like? And God's love looks like him giving himself to you.
Whatever condition you're in, whatever circumstances you face, you face it with God, with you, in them, through them. So God's love is not necessarily the absence of suffering or the presence of blessings.
It doesn't work like that. But rather, God's love is God giving himself to you. It also means that God's love is completely reliable because God is reliable.
[25:50] In other words, the moment we begin to understand that God is love, then we begin to understand that everything else that God does has to include his nature in it. Even in judgment, if you read Revelation, God is loving.

That's a difficult one to get your head around, isn't it? That even in judgment, God is loving. So God's love can never be determined, ever be determined, by him bringing certain blessings into your life and removing certain sufferings.
It could, but it could also mean that he is using them as a demonstration of his love for you for greater purposes. That's why it's so difficult to understand God's love.
God is love. God's love doesn't change because God doesn't change. The other difficulty is this, and this is where we come back to the affectfulness, is that God's love is the ultimate affection. Thomas Chalmers, back in the day, used to say that it is the ultimate affection that drives out all weaker affections. You know, we notice this with children around this time of year.
[27:03] The present that they wanted so much, you know, by the third week in January, is no longer they wanted. Right? And this is because something else comes in, and a newer affection drives out an older affection.

New affections drive out old affections. I said to you before about my brother who was, you know, he always claims that he's younger and better looking than me, which is probably true. But he, you know, he had plenty of girlfriends growing up, and he said, you know, there's nothing like a new one to get you over the old one.
Completely wrong. It's not the way to treat anybody, but boy, did I understand what he meant. And so do you. There's nothing like a new, stronger, more powerful affection to get you over old, weaker, and even hurtful ones.
There's nothing like something new to get you over the old. The thing is, with God's love, it is the ultimate affection that drives out all other affections.
Why is that so important? Well, it means that when you receive God's love, don't go looking anywhere else. There's nothing better out there.
[28:22] You won't find anything better than God's love. And if you're resisting God's love this morning, it is because you are caught into thinking that something else will make you happy, that something else will make you feel loved, and that's something else I hope it will last this time.

I don't want to disappoint you, but it won't because only God doesn't change. God's love doesn't change because God doesn't change.

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Well, let me have a few considerations then as we close. The main consideration here is what does it mean to be loved by God, but more importantly, what does it mean for God to be loved?
love? Well, his love is effectual, meaning that it provides us with the ability to love him back. We just don't know how we do it sometimes. We just don't know how we find ourselves wanting to live a faithful life when we can't really muster any particular reason for wanting to do it.
But God's love at work in us affects those desires in us to live obediently, to live and to follow, to begin praying again after a long time. In other words, God's love is able to gently, ease us back into the place where he wants us to be.
[29:41] It is the place where we learn all the basic Christian practices of praying and living and reading and following. And these habits, which are godly and ordained and ought to be practiced daily by the believer, aren't.

But it is love that gets us back into forming those habits again. We are creatures of habit. We are creatures of routine. And we kind of need that. But it needs to be sort of oiled, let's say, with the love of God so that we understand the benefit of doing it, so that we understand the reason for keeping it going.
It is not easy to get up every morning and pray. But it is a whole lot easier to get up every morning and pray if you've been doing it for 10 years or 20 years or 30 years. Okay? It's never easy to read your Bible at length.
But it becomes a whole lot easier if you've been doing it for a long time. So the idea of things being easy for some people and harder for others is not necessarily the case.
But rather, they've immersed themselves longer in the habit of doing it because love causes them to do it. Every morning, God's mercies are new.
[30:49] And therefore, every morning, there's probably a nudge of God gently on your shoulder saying, how about praying, how about spending two minutes with me today in prayer before you do anything else? How about listening to me?

How about listening to me today? I believe that God's love works like that in our lives. He works like that in my life. I mean, isn't that how the spirit works in the life of the believer?
Those nudges to say, does God not love you? That effectual love causes us to love God back.
The Christian is not one, and may I say this again, who weighs up everything that God has done for him and then decides to love God back. There is a little bit of truth in that.
And therefore, the Christian who doesn't engage his life in prayer and the Christian who doesn't engage his life in Bible study, not Bible reading, I always want to make a big difference to my children.
[31:51] There's a big difference between recognizing words on a page and understanding what the story means. There's a big difference. Well, there's a lot of resources in the world that allow Christians to recognize words on a page but not necessarily draw them into like a real and proper and deeper understanding of God's word.

Now, of course, the more you know you're bound to love, that God's word affects in you a greater love for him back because his word is effectual also. But if you live a Christian life not knowing that or at least trying to do it another way, the way it will be will be this.
I haven't prayed for a long time, therefore I feel guilty, therefore I'll pray. That's religion. It's not Christianity. It's definitely not the Christianity that's explained and applied in Scripture.
Rather, the reason we get up and pray is because we're motivated by God who loves us to do it. And practice does help us to do it easier. But it's not reciprocal.
It's not as if we're weighing up, you know, one day we have a good day remembering just how much God has done for us and then we just love him back. As though we do something more for one person than we do for the others because their present to us was greater.
[33:19] Right? How many of you have ever been caught at Christmas or at a birthday where you've received the present first but you've already bought the present for the other person? And upon receiving the present that they got for you, you think, I can't give them what I got for them.

Look at what they've got for me. Why do you do that? Why do you do that? love is because your definition of love is not caught up in as much as it's based so much on that reciprocal exchange of I'm measuring it against something else now.
That's not the way God's love works. God's love is effectual. In other words, we are never, ever really going to be able to love God back to the same extent that he loves us.

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We can't reciprocate that amount. We've just not got it in us. So God gradually immerses us in his love and causes us to walk in his ways.
I'll get it after I've finished. Let me close with this as the exhortation. God's love is Advent. God's love is Advent.
[34:33] If God is going to love the world, then God is going to have to come to this world. If God is going to have to setting his love in this world, he has to set himself into this world.

When we see Jesus lying in a manger by faith, of course, then we begin to recognize that this is love. This is love. This is how God is loving us.
And I want to give you the flip side. And the flip side is this, that you cannot know love if you do not know God. If everything that we have said this morning is true, that God is love, then it is equally true and it follows that you cannot know love unless you know God.
God is love and to know love is to know God. God is love and if God is going to love you, he has to enter into you in the same way that he entered into this world.
God is going to love you in the same way that he loves the others who already belong to him. So here's the call. I want you this morning to know that God loves you.
[35:46] But I can also explain why you may not know God's love because you do not know him. You cannot know God's love apart from him.

You can only know God's love by belonging to him. The way that you receive God's love is not by receiving something other than God or something from God but actually by receiving God himself. In other words, you too must have your own advent. You too must have your own advent, the day that God comes and dwells in you.
And from that day everything will develop from there. Your love for him will grow because your knowledge of his love for you and his effectual love will grow in you.
So this is the call. God is giving himself to you. God is giving himself to you. You are called to make room for advent, your advent, of God coming down and demonstrating his love to you in terms of relationship.
[36:56] Not by what he does or what he doesn't do but by his very presence dwelling in your very life. Amen. Amen.

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