

*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. 1 John 4:7-12*

One day a visitor to a small zoo was standing outside an animal exhibit when he noticed a uniformed zookeeper standing nearby. In expressing his appreciation the visitor said to the zookeeper: "How marvelous it is, that you are able to have both a lion and a monkey in the same animal exhibit. How well do they get along?" "Well" answered the zookeeper, "usually, okay. But occasionally they do have a disagreement, and then we have to go out and find ourselves a new monkey." God created lions to act like lions, and as long as the lions act like lions, that zoo will always need to get new monkeys.

The same is true for us. The Bible tells us that in the beginning God created human beings in His image – which means God created us in a way that everything we think, say and do should be in accordance with the character of God. Just as God created monkeys to be monkeys and lions to be lions, God created human beings to be humans created to be humans in God’s image. Now if we were truly honest, we would confess that we really don’t do that very well. Our rebellion and our rejection of God not long he created us - reflected not the image of God but rather the image of Self. Tragically, that sin infected not only every person that is born on earth, but also everything that God created - not only on the earth, but absolutely everything in every corner of the entire universe.

It’s only by the mercy and grace of our most loving God, that He put in place a means by which we have an opportunity to humbly receive the gift of forgiveness and redemption and restoration – when we surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. It is then we can once again reflect the image of God while we are here on earth, - and also reflect the fullness of the image of God in the glory of heaven. The words of our text for today reveal to us what the *character of God’s love* looks like in the image of God here on earth. These words are from a general letter that the apostle John wrote in the late first century to the churches across Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) regarding the false teachers who were invading the churches with the false teaching of what is known as Gnosticism. The word Gnosticism comes from the Greek word “gnosis” – which literally means “knowledge.” This teaching emphasized the special knowledge of a religious mysticism that declared that we are not forgiven, redeemed and restored back to God when we surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior – but, rather by a special revelation of the knowledge of God we can individually know through a special divine light already in the human soul. One prominent revelation of Gnosticism is their denial of the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus Christ.

The problem with the false teaching of Gnosticism is that teachings revelations are contrary to what we read in the Bible. And so the apostle John wrote this letter to the churches of his day and to the churches of our day - telling us, warning us, not to be taken in by teachings are not fully based on the Word of God. And John also tells us that there is more to our Christian faith than learning the truths of Bible – we also must live out those biblical truths – most specifically reflecting the image of God in the ways that we love God and we love each other. This is God the Father’s mandate for those who believe in Jesus Christ, His Son. In 1 John 2:17 John says: “*Whoever does the will of God abides forever.*” God’s will for born-again Christians is to surrender their lives to Christ and rejoice in the commands of Christ’s teaching and revel in the love of the Father as it continually translates into Christian love for one another and ministry to the world. In 1 John 3:18 he declares: “*Let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*” When we truly love God we will truly love one another.

Three times in this passage the phrase "love one another" occurs. In verse 7 ("*Beloved, let us love one another*"), in verse 11 ("*Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another*"), and in verse 12 ("*No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us*"). When something is repeated in the Bible three times like this, it is a divine exclamation mark. God is calling us to take supreme notice of what He is saying here. This morning God is clearly telling us that if He is the supreme love of our lives, if we are truly born of God, if we truly know God, if God is living within our hearts, if "*God abides in us*", if God's love is in us - then we will "*love one another*" because "*God is love.*" In being created in God's image for the purpose of reflecting His glory, we will "*love one another*" as God loves - "*for love is from God.*" God's Word reveals to us this morning *how* we can "*love one another*":

1) First, we can "*love one another*" because *God is love.* "*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*" (1 John 4:7-8). The apostle John argues here that we really shouldn't love God just because of what He has done for us, but rather *we are to love Him simply because of who He is.* "*God is love.*" Now, John is not writing here about one of the attributes of God; what he is saying is that it is God's nature to love. The greatest depth at which you can speak of the nature of God is the nature of His love. Everything God does, everything God is, all of God's attributes are filled with His love. We can speak of God's love in God's activity, such as speaking creation into being from that which did not exist. But the essential heart of God's love was prior to that activity, prior to any attributes that we learn about Him or in observing His activity. God is love by nature. There is no touch of God, no knowledge of God, no awareness of God that will not have God's love within it.

One of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith is that our God is a triune God, in that God exists eternally as three persons in one - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinity, in being one, loves each other, loves one another, forever. God experiences love at the very center of who He is in the Trinity. Even the difficult things about God - His judgments, His righteous anger, His wrath, all have within them His love. There is nothing we can say that is true about God that will not contain the reality that "*God is love.*" Because of who God is, and because we have "*been born of God*" - we are to "*love one another.*" Loving one another is how we reflect the image of our Creator. We look like our parents because we carry their DNA within the cell structure of our bodies. Our DNA carries traits and tendencies from whom we were born. There is nothing we can do about our DNA - we are born with it. When we are born of God, we get God's DNA. His DNA is love, because "*God is love.*" Our God-like DNA says that we are to "*love one another.*" If we don't "*love one another*" - if we hold grudges or harbor resentment, if we gossip or criticize or act unkindly towards each other, we reveal that we don't have the God's DNA, which means we haven't been born of God. God's love naturally flows from those who truly love God and know God and are born of God.

Now there are things that we call *love* which people do, who are not born of God. There are *loves* that are born not of God - but of self-affirmation or personal conviction or sexual desire or natural affection and charitable aspiration. These are NOT of God's love because the motivation for these loves don't point to the divine character of our most loving God. They point to us. They show no sign of being born of God. Love that is born of God, is a love that loves one's enemies and forgives when wronged and sacrifices the most for those who appreciate it the least. This is a love that we see in Jesus, a love that can only be explained by the supernatural character of a loving God, a love that assures us that we are born of God, a love that reflects the supremacy of God - a love that will cause the world to see and give glory to our Father in heaven, as Jesus said, "*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven*" (Matthew 5:16) - which means Jesus was could be saying "Let the light of God's love shine before others, so that they may see the good works of God's love and give glory to your loving Father who is in heaven!"

Don't you long to love God like that? Don't you long for our church to love like that? There is nothing more exciting and satisfying and fulfilling than experiencing the love of God so deeply that it spills out over into all of our relationships. That's what this letter from the apostle John is all about: being so deeply transformed by the love of God within us, that the supernatural love of a supreme and sovereign God spills out of us. We *can, we must, we will* love one another, because "*God is love.*"

2) Secondly, we can "love one another" because God loved us. "*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.*" (1 John 4:9-11). "*In this the love of God was made manifest among us.*" God demonstrated His love for us by sending his Son to earth. The love of God for us was shown in the death of his Son Jesus Christ on the cross to die for our sins. God's love for us cost God His Son. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, he paid the penalty for our sins. A holy God turned His back on His only begotten Son who was covered with our sin. At that moment of separation from the Father, Jesus cried, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me*" (Matthew 27:46). On the cross, God's love for us cost Him the life of his Son, a love which offers us a new life and opens up for us the floodgates of eternal life, at the expense of the humiliation and death of His only Son Jesus.

The author Richard Armstrong, in his book "Make Your Life Worthwhile," reported the story about a man in Wales who sought to win the affection of a lady who lived next door to him for 42 years before she finally said, "Yes" and they became husband and wife, both at 74 years of age. For more than 40 years, the shy but persistent man slipped a weekly love letter under the door of her home. But time and time again, she continually refused to speak and mend the spat that had parted them many years before. After writing 2,184 love letters without ever getting a spoken or written answer, the man eventually summoned up enough courage to present himself in person. He knocked on the door of her home and asked for her hand and to his great delight and joyful surprise, she finally accepted!

This is our story as fallen humanity. Our Almighty and most sovereign God has revealed his love for us down through the ages, throughout history and life as we know it. Time and time again, God tried to get His message of love through to those whom He created with little or no response. Finally, He wrapped up His love into the form of the Person of Jesus Christ. Because He is the God of love, He broke through history and broke through the hardness of our self-centered hearts in His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ - who sacrificially came into our sinful world and live among us, and, be one of us and give his life for our sins. The love of God is the language of the Cross. With every lash on the back of Jesus, with each nail that pierced his hands and feet, with the spear that went through His side - each of these actions is a loving demonstration of God's love for each and every one of us. Romans 5:8 tells us that "*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*"

But not only is the death of Jesus the demonstration of God's love for us, it is also the supreme expression of Christ's love for all who receive him as their greatest joy. The love of Christ is revealed on the cross and we are wooed and swayed by his heart for us to know him as a precious gift - and as our hearts are opened and filled with his love, we become his, and he becomes our greatest treasure.

In John 15:11 Jesus said: "*These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*" John writes: "*God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.*" Here we read that we are the objects of God's deep love and affection. God sent his Son so we might live through him. God has offered us the gift of eternal life. It hasn't been offered to anyone else or anything else in all of creation. Trees don't have eternal life. Animals don't have eternal life. Our houses, our cars, our jobs, our money, our hobbies don't have eternal life. Nothing other than human beings have been created for the joy of eternal life. We are the objects of God's love. It is for us, and only for us that he sent his Son to the cross so we can know the joy of eternal life with him.

God sent his Son into the midst of the mess of fallen humanity race. He didn't stay in tower. God came in human form to be in the middle of it all. He faced temptation; He was hungry, thirsty, and tired. He experienced the range of human emotions, from happiness to sadness, and from anger to delight. He felt physical, emotional, and spiritual pain. God came and got directly involved into the struggle of sinful human life. He didn't sit on his throne in heaven and throw out clichés about love and death and struggle. He came and rolled up his sleeves and got his hands dirty – and his body bloody - for us.

*“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.”* It's not our love for God that motivated God to send his Son to die for us. We had nothing to do with it. God sent his Son because He loved us. He did so to fulfill this big hairy theological word *“propitiation”* which means *“the removal of wrath by the offering of a gift.”* Propitiation means Jesus paid for our sins by giving the gift of His life on our behalf. He took the punishment that we deserved for our sins by dying for our sins. Jesus on the cross is a loving gift from our sovereign loving God.

Ephesians 2:4-8 tells us: *“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”*

We did not and do not deserve this kind of treatment from God. We do not deserve His love. We can do nothing to earn His love or His approval because God's *“great love”* is not about us. It's all about God. God loves us because *“God is love.”* Verse 11 says, *“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”* It is as if John is saying: *“How can we not love each other when we have been recipients of such great love from God.”*

The truth is, we cannot call ourselves Christians if we do not love each other. We cannot call ourselves Christians when we do not love each other in our attitudes and actions. Because God is love and because God loved us in Jesus Christ we cannot become angry at each other and others – even if we feel we have been hurt by each other or others. We can't do it because as children of God it's not in our DNA. Because God loved us, we can forgive those who have hurt us, we can approach those whom we are struggling with, we can love even when our love is not returned. We can even love and forgive our enemies because it's in our DNA to do so. Jesus did, and so we are to do so also. Loving like God is risky and hard. His love demands much of us. Sometimes, often times, God's love hurts. But that's who God is. God is love. And love is what we need from Him. And love is what we continue to need from Him. Otherwise we are lost in our sin. When we fail to love and we are still lost in our sin. We can love, we must love one another because God is love and because God loved us.

3) Thirdly, we can “love one another” because God is in us. *“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us”* (1 John 4:12). We must love one another, not just because we are supposed to, but because *“God abides in us”* – which means God lives in us. He is alive and at work in our hearts. Love is who God is. Love is what God does, which means love is what we do. Love is at work in us bringing us into is the perfection of who God is in us. When asked what is the greatest commandment of all Jesus said: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these”* (Mark 12:30-31). On the night before he was arrested and beaten and crucified Jesus told his disciples: *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* (John 15:9-12).

God purposed that the world would see His love in us and through us. The indwelling presence of God becomes visible only when we manifest God's love by loving each other and others. As long as we love just our family and friends and those whom we like, no one has any idea of the love of God that is in us. But when we start loving those who don't care about us, when we start returning good for evil, when we start being forgiving, patient, tender, thoughtful and considerate to those who are stubborn, obstinate, and selfish - then the loving presence of God within us becomes visible to the world. Most men and women and children of today are not acquainted very much with the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. But everyone that meets you and I could become acquainted with the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to us - if we love them as God loves us. If they can't see God's love in us, it's because God is not living and working in our lives. If God is in our hearts and souls, God's love - love for each other, love for one another, love for anyone and everyone, will be there too.

There is a true story about a man named John Griffith, who lived in Oklahoma in 1929 and lost all he had in the stock market. And so he moved to Mississippi where he took a job as bridge tender for a railroad trestle that ran over a river, where in 1937 he was involved in a horrific accident. One day his 8-year-old son, Greg, spent the day with John Griffith at work. Greg poked around the bridge-tender office most of the day and asked a countless question as children will do. Then a ship came through and John opened up the draw bridge. After a moment he realized his son wasn't in the office and as he looked around, to his horror, he saw his son Greg climbing around on the gears of the draw bridge. He hurried outside to rescue his son - but just then he heard, what he knew was a fast approaching passenger train, the Memphis Express, filled with 400 people. He yelled to his son, but the noise of the now clearing ship and the oncoming train made it impossible for the boy to hear him. And all of a sudden John Griffith realized his horrible dilemma - the drawbridge needed to close - and if he took the time to rescue his son, the train would crash killing all 400 aboard - but if he closed the bridge, he would sacrifice his son. It was then John Griffith made the difficult decision to pull the lever and close the bridge. It is said, as the train went by he could see the faces of the passengers, some reading, some even waving, oblivious to the deep pain of the sacrifice that had just been made on their behalf.

We live in that same kind of world. We live in a world where many, if not most, know nothing of the loving sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. We live a world that is dying for God's love. In fact they are dying without it. Love is the vast, surging hunger of the heart of our day. Lack of love is the foundation of all of our problems in life. John Griffith's sacrificing his son to save others should not shock us. His action was a remnant of the image of a loving God that remains in our spiritual DNA. We are the only channels by which the world can see and know and experience the love of God. The only way the world we see God's love is when we love God and as we love each another.

*"No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us."*

Love is perfected when we sacrificially love one another, because God is love, because God sacrificially loved and continues to love us - and because we were created to love as God loves. The love of God is perfected, only when it becomes visible in us. God's love in Jesus Christ - the life, the suffering, the death, the resurrection, the hope, and the glory - reaches its ultimate and final conclusion when the love of God becomes visible in us towards each other and others. Anything and everything else that is not of God's love is abortive and incomplete because these things are of our human emotions and sinful flesh. We live in a barren world, full of countless loves but not like the manifestation of sacrificial love of God. . In being created in the image of God, we have within us the divine love of God, the life-sacrificing DNA of the sovereign and supreme God Himself. God call us this morning to love and live as Jesus loved and lived.

God alone is the source of true love. God's love is the only kind that satisfies the hunger of the human heart. I pray God would fill our hearts and souls with His love, so that we might recognize ourselves as called, above all else, to this great task of being a demonstration, an abundant manifestation, of God's love. I pray also that we would not only take the call to love one another *seriously*, but we would also begin to reflect God's love for one another *immediately*. Because God is love and because He loved us, we *can* love one another. Loving God and loving like God is what we were created for. Amen.

*Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Romans 5:1-5*

*Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Colossians 3:12-14*

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Pastor Leland Botzet

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