

The Love of God

A Gospel View

Scripture: *1 John 4:7-21.*

Exegetical Big Idea: The definition of God's love, and His display of His love through the gospel, calls us to demonstrate this love to others.

Introduction

The subject of the love of God is a vast and endless one that we can never exhaust no matter how much we reflect or talk about it. As a matter of fact, from the first page of the Bible to the very last page, the single story of God's redemption that unfolds throughout the Bible, is really the single story of God's love.

In **1 John 4:7-21**, first, the Apostle John gives us the gospel's *definition* of God's love. Second, he reminds us of how, through the gospel, God permanently *displayed* His love to us. Third, the Apostle then reminds us of why and how we need to persistently *demonstrate* to others this love of God in our own Christian lives.

3D's: *Definition, Display, and Demonstrate.* Read Passage.

I. Definition (Verses 8 & 16)

- 1) In both verses **8** and **16**, the Apostle John defines God's love by stating very simply and powerfully, that, *God is love*. He is saying, God doesn't just have love, He *is* love itself.
- 2) When you see a painting by Picasso, or any other world-renowned artist, you know that this is their art because they all have a particular style that defines their art. It is precisely the same with God. his entire creation bears his signature of love, and testifies that He is love.

Look at nature all around us; the earth, the sun, the plants and trees, the rain, everything in nature gives of itself to us in love to reflect God's love evidenced in His creation. In **Psalm 19:1** the Psalmist declares that, *the heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*

This phrase, *the glory of God*, is defined in New Bible Dictionary as, *that which manifests the presence and the character of God.* And indeed, if you have ever admired a breath-taking sunrise or sunset on the horizon, or a beautiful landscape, you have experienced the manifestation of the presence and the character of God that shows His love exhibited in His creation.

- 3) Think of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They lived in a perfect world awash with the love of God everywhere. Adam and Eve lived in an unspoiled world without climate change and global warming, pandemics, war, inflation, and all the rest of it. God's love was evident everywhere around them.

God had created our first parents, with all of us inside them, and placed them, in this perfect world completely unmotivated by anything He wanted from us. His love was completely unmotivated and unconditional.

The human love we give or receive from others is very different from God's unconditional love because there is always a *because* attached to human love; we love people because they are good or beautiful or kind or whatever, or because they are our spouses, or our children or our friends, or our workmates, etc.

Human love is often self-serving and self-focused because we love someone because of something in that person that meets our need for affection or affirmation or procreation.

Unlike our flawed human love, God loves us not because of something in us that meets His need. He loves us to meet our need for love. Our experience of human love is the opposite of God's love because God's love is completely unconditional and unmotivated; it springs spontaneously out of His divine nature of unconditional love.

The love of a mother for a baby is probably the nearest experience that human beings have of the unconditional love of God. Nothing about the baby's behavior should make the mother love the baby. Sometimes the mother has nearly died to birth the baby, the baby gives her sleepless nights, the baby smells, cries, and generally makes her life difficult.

Yet, even a mother's love is still a very poor comparison to God's unconditional love because, some mothers, after all, abandon, and even, abort their babies, as the Prophet Isaiah reminds us in **Isaiah 49:15**.

- 4) God's love that is seen in His original creation is the reason why, in **Hosea 6:7**, when our first parent' disobeyed and rebelled against God, God described that sad break in His relationship with our first parents, and us, by declaring that Adam refused His love.
- 5) As a result of that break, we see in **Gen. 3:10-13** that our first parents' sense of God's love was replaced by guilt, shame, and fear which are still very much our sad legacy today as fallen human beings.

Every time we are delinked from an inner consciousness of the love of God, we are plagued by guilt, fear, and shame, and we seek to overcome these with the fig leaves of money, status, achievement, etc, just like we see our first parents doing in the Garden, when they disobeyed God and lost their sense of his unconditional love for them. This explains why, here in **verse 18** of our passage, John declares that our experience of God's love casts out fear from our hearts.

There are people who argue against God's love because they say that if God is love how can He allow so many terrible things to happen in this world, like the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine? These people are not aware of the fact that God originally created a perfect world and that the evil of pain and suffering came into this world as a result of our first parents' sin of disobedience to God in the Garden of Eden that we read about in **Gen. 3**.

These people who argue against God's love do not know that they are recipients of God's love. In **Matt. 5:45**, Christ reminded us that God causes His sun to rise on both godly people and ungodly people alike, and He sends rain on the both righteous and the unrighteous. So, these people who refuse the biblical teaching about the love of God, are beneficiaries of His love.

If God were to withhold His love because of the sins of this world, where would this world be?

- 6) This God's selfless and self-giving love that God has for us should remind us that, no matter what happens to us, no matter how much we may not understand it, God has allowed it to happen because it has passed the test of His love for us.
- 7) So, we can summarize **our first D** by saying that this **definition** of God's love means that everything that God does, or does not do, in His world, and in our lives, is based on His unchanging divine nature of love.

II. Display (Verses 9-18)

- 1) In **verses 9 and 10** John presents God's supreme display of His love for us. He writes: *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

In **John 3:16**, and again in the preceding chapter of this epistle, in **verse 16** of **chapter 3**, John had written this: *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us.*

- 2) John declares in these verses that God the Son did not come to die for us because we loved Him! On the contrary, not only did we not love Him, as John says here, we wanted nothing to do with God, because, as John again reminds us in **John 3:19**, we loved the darkness of sin rather than the light and truth of God. God the Son came to die for us to display God's love for us.

In **Rom. 5:7-8**, the Apostle Paul echoes this same idea by writing this: *Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

- 3) From **verse 13 to 18**, John explains what is entailed in God's display of His love for us through the gospel. In **verse 17**, John writes this: *This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the Day of Judgment.*

John is saying here that the confidence that you and I can have on the Day of Judgment at Christ's Second Coming is that, because of God's love for us displayed in the gospel, we will not get from God what we deserve to get from Him as sinners, which is His judgment of eternal damnation and separation from God. Bible scholars refer to this as the *mercy of God*.

- 4) Still in **verse 17**, John writes: *In this world we are like Jesus.* Just think of what an extraordinary statement this is!

John means that as Christians who have placed our faith in Christ's work on the cross for us, we are now getting from God what we absolutely do not deserve and could never earn from God.

He is saying that, as Christians, we are now getting from God the forgiveness of our sins, God's salvation, transmission of the life of Christ into us through His in-dwelling Holy Spirit, as well as our adoption into His family to become co-heirs with Christ as Paul reminds us in **Rom. 8:17**.

- 5) So, when John writes here that, *in this world we are like Jesus*, he is reminding us that, when we become Christians, God now looks at us, and treats us, the same way He sees and treats Christ Jesus.
- 6) God treats us as if we have done everything that Jesus Christ has done, and as if we are everything Jesus Christ was, because Jesus Christ lived the life we should have lived, and He died the death that we should have died. Bible scholars refer to this un-earned, un-deserved, and even un-asked for, display of God's love as *the grace of God*.

Your experience of God's salvation, your experience of God's provision, His protection, and His daily presence in your life, all of which we do not really deserve, are the tangible proof of God's unconditional grace and mercy in your life that displays His love for you.

- 7) So, we can summarize **our second D** by saying that, in the grace and mercy of God that shines so brightly through the gospel, we see the love of God supremely **displayed** to us.

II. Demonstrate (Verses 9-21)

- 1) In **verse 7** John writes, *let us love one another*. The Greek word for *love* that John uses is a Greek verb in the active, present tense that literally means *Let us practice loving each other*. *Practice* refers to concrete action, not mere emotions or words.
- 2) John is saying that, you and I, as the recipients of God's unconditional love, must demonstrate to others the same mercy and grace that God has shown to us in the gospel.
- 3) John is saying that we are to do this, not primarily through our feelings, but through our *will* in terms of decisions we make to engage in concrete actions that demonstrate God's love. This expectation runs throughout the NT, and it explains why, in the NT, the love of God always refers to concrete action, rather than to just emotions and words.
- 4) For example, in **verses 17 and 18** of the preceding chapter, **chapter 3**, this is what John had written: *If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

- 5) Have you noticed that the NT never asks us to *like* people, but instead to *love* them? The reason is this: We naturally and effortlessly *like* people who are *like* us because we have things in common with them. We don't choose to *like* them; liking them comes naturally to us. God's love, on the other hand, is the action of our will that has nothing to do with whether we *like* someone or not.

Since we *like* people with whom we have things in common, God probably doesn't *like* us very much because, as rebellious sinners, we are everything that He is not, and we do everything that He does not *like*. He is not *like* us sinners, and we are not *like* Him in His pure holiness and righteousness.

This means that God expects us too to decide that although we do not *like* someone for whatever reason, we will love him or her by deciding with our will to engage in actions that demonstrate love to them by being kind to them, by being generous to them, by being patient with them, by being gentle with them, by forgiving them, and so on.

- 6) The Lord expects us to be able to do this based on what John writes here in **verses 12 and 13**: *But if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of His Spirit.* John is saying that, when we were born again the Holy Spirit came to in-dwell us to empowers us to love others in the same way that He loves us.

In **Rom. 5:8**, the Apostle Paul echoes this same idea when he writes that, when we become Christians, God's love is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. The in-dwelling Holy Spirit, in other words, gives us both the ability to experience God's love within ourselves, and the ability to demonstrate this love to others.

This explains why in **Gal. 5:22** the first item on Paul's list of the *fruit* of the Holy Spirit is love, the love of God. The word *fruit* here refers to the result of the Holy Spirit living and working in our lives to impart to us the character of Christ and to empower us to love like Christ.

This explains why John ends our passage with these words in **verses 19-21**: *We love because He first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And He has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.*

This is clear irrefutable logic that does not need any explanation.

- 7) So, we can summarize **our third D** then by saying that, the one distinguishing characteristic of Christians is that God empowers us to **demonstrate** to others His kind of love that, through the gospel of Christ, He has bestowed on us, and, indeed, continues to bestow on us.

Conclusion

This is how, in this passage, these **3D's** give us, first, the gospel's *definition* of God's love, second, remind us of God's love *displayed* in the gospel of Christ Jesus, and third, call us to equally *demonstrate* this love to others.

The Apostle John, in several places in his Gospel, refers to himself as *the disciple whom Jesus loved*. By this phrase, John did not mean that the Lord loved him more than He loved the other disciples, as some Bible readers have mistakenly thought. What John meant to convey with these words was his own overwhelming sense of God's love for him personally that permeates all his NT writings. This explains why Bible scholars often refer to him as the *Apostle of love*.

John wrote this epistle and his Gospel as an old man more than fifty years after the ascension of Christ but his overwhelming sense of God's love still shines through all his writings. Listen to what he wrote in **1 John 3:1 (KJV)**: *Behold, what manner of love the father hath bestowed upon us!* This is how the **Message Bible** translates this: *What marvelous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it - we're called the children of God!*

You see, whenever we experience the love of God from whomever it may be, it marks us, in the same way it marked the Apostle John. This has been true in my life, and I'm sure it's true in your own life. For example, to this day, I remember how marked I was by an experience of God's love that was demonstrated to me many years ago as a young businessman. *Share my Botswana-Zambia train journey story.*

Every time you and I demonstrate the love of God to others, as this Zambia women demonstrated to me, we leave a mark of grace on their lives. When we give to orphans and widows, or to those who are less fortunate than ourselves, whenever we do someone a favour without expecting anything back in return, we mark them with the love of God.

Every time we do something like that, something from which we stand to gain nothing, something that is sacrificial and self-giving, we are affirming this definition of God's love, we are being motivated by God's display of His love for us through the gospel of Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are clearly demonstrating the love of God to others in our broken and love-less world.

This is why I will end by suggesting that we will all do well, to adopt as our own, this prayer that the Apostle Paul prayed for the Ephesian Christians in **Eph. 3:17-19**:

And I pray that your roots may go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love; so that you will be able to feel and understand, as all God's children should, how long, how wide, how deep, and how high his love really is; and to experience this love for yourselves.

You and I need to make this our own prayer, because considering how flawed and wanting our own feeble human love is, considering this definition of God's love, and how He has displayed and demonstrated it to us in the gospel, I'm sure you'll agree with me that you and I are never more like God than when we love others as He has loved us. Let us pray.

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