

## **We Love Because He First Loved Us | Reading: 1 John 4:13-21**

*“Consistent love for other Christians is key to a healthy spiritual life because loving fellowship is God’s prescribed environment for growth. This kind of love is based on commitment to God himself. To be committed to God himself is to be committed to his community, the Church. This is not a commitment to the theory of the Church, but to an actual body of other fallible, imperfect people. Many of us treat church life like immature adolescents. From other Christians we want thrills, constant exhilaration & to have our needs met. When Christian brothers & sisters fall short of our expectations, when they are boring, imperfect & fail to meet our needs for strokes, we pout, turn away & isolate ourselves from them. Jesus calls us to mature commitment of love for his people—the very people in our fellowship.” – John Wimber*

What does God want us to be consistently committed to? Why did he send his Son to die & rise again? I think John gives an answer to this question in verse 12 when he writes: **“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.”** He wants us to be consistently committed to love - to displaying & growing in the love which flows from God & which was displayed on the cross. Why? So the reality of God is seen among us & so the love of God is perfected in us! This word **“perfected”** or **“completed”** (NIV) appears three times in our reading today (12, 17, 18). The word (GK: *teleioo*) refers to attaining an end or purpose. It refers to completing an activity or to accomplishing or fulfilling a purpose. So when John writes of love being perfected in us we realise; that while love flows from God, & while love is ultimately defined by the atoning sacrifice of Christ, it can only fulfil its purpose in what it accomplishes for, in & with us. John teaches us that the atoning love of Jesus did something for us (10) & he says this love is perfected in & with us (12, 17, 18). The purpose of the atoning love of Christ was to accomplish everything necessary to reconcile us to God & to create a new community of love. In fact to be reconciled to God is at the same time to become part of his new community in which his love is displayed & perfected. So in this sense N. T. Wright comments that; *“What God launched decisively in Jesus, he wants to complete in & through us.* Why is this important to understand? Because according to John love for one another is what Christ’s atoning love is meant to produce in & among us.

As well as the word **“perfected”** appearing three times in these verses the word **“sent”** also appears three times in reference to Jesus (9, 10, 14). The word **“sent”** speaks of Christ’s mission & the word **“perfected”** speaks of the outcome of his mission. Taken together we realise John is showing us we cannot be truly committed to Christ’s mission without also being committed to Christian community – we cannot truly be part of his mission to save the world without also being committed to loving one another. If we can take or leave Christian community, if we can take or leave fellowship with other believers, if it is not a priority to us, then there is something deficient in our understanding of the atoning work of Christ & in our understanding of Christian mission. At the beginning of chapter 5 John will write; **“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.”** And our passage today ends with the words; **“And this commandment we have from him:**

**whoever loves God must also love his brother.”** And of course when John writes this he has particular brothers & sisters in mind, those who were part of the same local fellowships.

***So to enable us to grow in love John teaches us the Father has given us his Spirit (13) as well as sending his Son (14-15):***

### **1. Given his Spirit (13)**

John writes in the context of loving one another; **“By this we know that we abide in him and he is us, because he has given us of his Spirit”** (cf. 3:24). So love for one another is evidence of God abiding in us (12) & the gift of his Spirit is evidence of us abiding in God, and God abiding in us. In reality it is only because the Spirit has been given that we can love one another as we are called. Yet the flip side is: that because the Spirit has been given we will grow in loving one another – **“his love IS perfected in us”!** Love is the number one fruit of God’s Spirit, it is top of the list; there is simply no escaping this & Christian fellowship is the place where this love is to be fundamentally displayed! It is the number one visible indicator that God’s Spirit has indeed been given to us (cf. 1 Cor. 13).

Listen to these challenging words by D. Edmond Hiebert: *“Since God’s love is no longer visible in the presence of the incarnate Christ here on earth, God is manifesting his love as it is now displayed in his people.”* Wow. Let the weight of that sink in. The love we thought about in verses 9-10 is now displayed in Christian community. That is the purpose of Christian community. How well are we doing? God has given his Spirit so this love will be perfected in us, so we will display his love! Again the answer is not trying harder to love each other; the answer is the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives & fellowship. These words are to challenge us yes but more than this they are to show us how much we need & depend on the Spirit. We need nothing less than the gift of God’s Spirit to love like this!

### **2. Sent his Son (14-15)**

In verses 14-16 John then changes direction a little bit in order to weave the importance of the truth we believe into his teaching on love. He writes; **“And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.”** We read words like **“testimony”** and **“confesses”**, in verse 16 he will also talk about knowing and believing. There is no tension between doctrine and love in John’s mind, in fact it is *essential* Christian doctrine that teaches us we are loved by God & therefore ensures we abide in love. In verse 16 John powerfully declares; ***“So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.”***

The result of truly knowing & believing the love God has for us is abiding in love – that is continuing in love, continuing to grow in love, continuing to love one another as God in Christ has loved us. Essential Christian

doctrine which confesses Jesus is the Son of God & which testifies to the Father sending his Son to save the world, to be the propitiation for our sins. It is this very doctrine along with the presence & activity of the Spirit in & among us that keeps us abiding in love for one another. We are to be a fellowship that celebrates God's love for us & which displays God love as we grow in loving one another.

***The fruit of knowing and believing God's love is:***

What we see in the remainder of the chapter is that fruit of knowing & believing God's love is freedom from fear of punishment & love for one another.

**1. Freedom from fear of punishment (16-18)**

Listen to verses 16-18; ***“So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgement, because as he is so also 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 been perfected in love.”*** So when we put all this together we realise there are two signs that we know & believe perfect love. 1. Love for one another (12)... 2. Fear from fear of punishment (17-18).

Let me highlight here that it is because we know & believe how God has specifically loved us (10) that we can know & believe the love God continues to have for us (16). This is so important to see. For it is in knowing & believing specifically that God ***“loved us & sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins”*** that we find freedom from fear of judgement & punishment. There is no reason for fear of punishment when we truly grasp the truth of this! For if Christ has taken our judgement... taken our full punishment... then what is left to fear? We cannot truly know & believe in Christ's atoning love & fear God's punishment at the same time. For it is in knowing & believing this atoning love of God that fear of judgement & punishment is cast out of our hearts & minds once & for all. All we are left with then is confidence for the day of judgement!

We can be free from fear of judgement & punishment because we know & believe God has loved us in a very specific way... this is what frees us. Every reason for fear of punishment was erased on the cross!!! As Paul writes in Romans 5:9; ***“Since, therefore we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.”*** This is why Paul could also write in Romans 8:1; ***“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*** And as 1 Thessalonians 1:10 declares; we are now waiting ***“for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”*** This is why the knowing & believing is so important!

## 2. Love for one another (19-21)

John now returns to his main objective in these verses, the importance of loving one another. Verses 20-21 could simply be summed up like this: To love God & hate your brother is to live a lie & to love God & love your brother is to obey God. Yet just before this we are told in verse 19 that **“we love because he first loved us.”** Listen to John; **“We love because he first loved us. If anyone says; “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”** John’s logic is simple, to not love brothers & sisters in Christ is to not love God & to love them is to love God. The two simply cannot be pulled apart; you can’t have one without the other. The degree to which we love our brothers & sisters in Christ shows whether or not we really love God. You can’t say you love the Father if you hate his children; you cannot truly fellowship with the Father without also fellowshiping with his children. At the beginning of chapter 5 John will say just that.

We know God’s love is perfected in us then when we have personal freedom from fear of punishment & corporate love for one another. Believing we are loved as God says displays the love of God & loving one another displays the love of God. It’s also important to note that the word **“perfected”** carries in it the idea of growth to completion. For none of us are 100% there; yet we ought to be growing in the direction of perfection if God is truly at work in & among us.

### Conclusion - Jesus commands us to love each other (21)

In John’s Gospel during his crucifixion John records those famous words of Jesus; **“It is finished”** (19:30). It is because of these words that we know our debt is paid in full & therefore we fear no punishment. Yet just before this we hear Jesus say to his mother Mary; **“Woman, behold, your son!”** & to John; **“Behold, your mother!”** As Jesus is dying, in this moving act of sacrificial love, he creates a new family; he gives his mother to his friend and his friend to his mother. He changes the basis of relationships and a new family is born at the cross, a new community is formed. Two broken people are put together at the cross & they are encouraged to commit to loving one another as family. That is a picture of church. Jesus died & rose again so his love might be reflected & perfected in a community gathered at the cross of Christ. No wonder it is John who wrote so much about loving one another. The cross of Christ gives us confidence before God at the judgement... YES... but it is at this same cross that we also hear Jesus calling us to commit to loving one another. How can we look at the face of atoning love and at the same time hate our brother or sister? As N. T. Wright comments; *“Only powerful love can keep us upright. And that powerful love is to be found, as always, as we gaze at the cross.”* We love because he first loved us!