

What is Love? Part 1

1. Introduction

- a. As I read the bible, especially the New Testament, I find the word “LOVE” mentioned 219 times.
 - i. It is mentioned so often that my eyes glaze over when I read it because I cannot distinguish its meaning beyond the generally accepted understanding of the word.
 - ii. If I struggle with trying to understand the what and the how of love, I am sure that you struggle with it as well.
 1. I hope that this sermon series will challenge your current beliefs about love as well as ask some questions that stir you up and make you a bit uncomfortable.
 2. But hey, why be comfortable?
- b. Here are a few questions that we will answer over the next few weeks:
 - i. Can I love someone even when I don't feel like it?
 - ii. Does God love me when I don't love Him or when I fail?
 - iii. If God expects me to love others, does that mean I have to manufacture works of love?
 - iv. Is love something I do or feel?
 - v. If God is love, why do bad things happen to me?

2. We are going to start with a key Scripture this morning:

- a. 1 John 4:7-10 *Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 But anyone who does not love does not know God – for God is love. 9 God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. 10 This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice (propitiation) to take away our sins.*
- b. John begins this passage on love with a strange statement, “let us continue to love one another.” Basically he is telling his readers to “**Become What You Are.**”
 - i. In **Verse 7** we are commanded to love even though the passage says that it is our nature to love.
 1. Why is this? Isn't it redundant? But this is the genius of God's word.
 2. You and I are called to become what we already are.
 3. You are called to do what God is at work in you to do.
 - ii. Let me explain:
 1. When you become a Christian, according to the bible, you become a brand new creature.
 2. Your old ways of living begin to change, as you become what God has remade you to be.
 3. It begins the day you receive the love of God in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.
 4. And it is a life-long process.

5. There isn't always a magical snap of the fingers change of behavior, but there is a sudden and immediate change in our nature (heart) when you pray to receive Christ.
- iii. This process is meant to lead us to watch what God is doing, and to allow Him to do it in us!
- c. Look at the second half of Verse 7 which says, "*He who loves is born of God and knows God.*"
 - i. When you become a new creation in Christ, you begin to act according to the new nature that the Holy Spirit imparts when He takes up residence in you the moment you believe.
 - ii. Now, there are many kinds of love; mothers and fathers love their children, spouses love one another, there is kinds of love such as my love for chocolate or my dog.
 1. But these aren't what the passage is talking about.
 2. These don't point to the supernatural work of God.
 3. They are not the sign of being born of God.
 4. They are only shadows of the love that God is revealing to us.
- d. The great revelation of the nature of God is found in verse 8 where we learn that "God is Love"
 - i. **Verse 8** *Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*
 1. To say that God is love does not mean that love is God.
 - a. We do not discover what God is like by analyzing our ideas of love.
 - b. To do so would be to worship some shallow ideal of love instead of God.
 - c. **It is not our understanding of love that defines God but God's action toward us that defines what real love is.**
 2. This expression and revelation of God's nature is totally and earth shatteringly revolutionary!
 - a. You notice that it doesn't say "God has love" or that "God is loving" which would be to say that God is not sometimes loving and sometimes unloving, today loving some people and hating others, and tomorrow hate those who were previously loved.
 - b. It is not merely saying that God loves.
 - i. That is true, but John is putting emphasis on the character of God.
 - ii. By saying that "God is Love" we learn the distinctive character of God that in everything God does, God is a loving God.
 - ii. There was never a time that God started loving or that God will stop loving.
 1. Love didn't begin when God created the universe. Love was already there.
- e. **God shows us what REAL love is!**
 - i. *NLT: Verse9-10 God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. 10 This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice. to take away our sins*
 - ii. *NAS:v10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*
 - iii. What is love? What is REAL love?

1. I have seen bumper stickers that say, "REAL men don't ask directions."
2. I would love to see one that describes REAL love.
3. Verse 10 tells us what REAL love is!
 - a. *In this the love of God was demonstrated toward us, that God sent His only Son.*
 - b. Love is not only defined by the sacrifice of Jesus
 - i. 1John 3:16 *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.*
 - c. It is also defined by the giving of the Father.
 - d. It was a sacrifice for the Father to send the Second Person of the Trinity, His one and only Son, and a sacrifice to pour out the judgment we deserved upon Him..
4. This presents the concept of "Propitiation" which carries with it the idea of a sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God.
 - a. God rightly regards us as worthy targets of His judgment.
 - b. We were rebels and enemies of Him, even if we didn't know it.
 - c. But on the cross, Jesus took the punishment our sin deserved
 - d. His sacrifice turned away the judgment we should have received.
 - e. We easily think how this shows the love of Jesus, but John wants us to understand it also shows the love of God the Father:
5. **We didn't love God; it was he who loved us! This is how we learn what REAL LOVE is.**

3. Let's look at a few aspects of God's love, REAL Love:

a. **God's love is unconditional.**

- i. God does not say, "I will love you IF you prove that you deserve my love and are worthy of it."
- ii. He doesn't say, "I will love you WHEN you clean your life up."
- iii. Christ died for the ungodly, the immoral, the social outcasts...and for you and I.
 1. There are no strings attached to God's love.
 2. He loved every person enough to send His Son into the world to die for our sins.
 3. He makes the same offer of love to every human being.
 4. That is why it is called "Good News."
- iv. *Hettie Green was a famous millionaire. She lived in seclusion and became a virtual recluse. She had only a few friends and an ugly mongrel dog that kept biting the few friends she did have. One of them said, "You've got to get rid of that dog." Hettie refused. She said, "That dog loves me and he doesn't even know how rich I am."*
- v. Human love is conditional, it is often based on what we will get in return.
- vi. God's love is "out there" love.
 1. *"While we were yet sinners (enemies of God) Christ died for the ungodly"*
Romans 5:8

2. None of us deserved to be loved and yet He loved us by letting His Son to die on the cross
 3. God extends His love and risks total and utter rejection.
 4. And many reject folks His love.
 5. They view it as conditional... “oh, if I receive your love I will have to clean up my life.”
 - a. What they don’t realize that if and when they truly receive the gift of His love and forgiveness, is that they will be utterly and completely changed from the inside out.
 - b. One of the remarkable things about divine love is that the EXPERIENCE OF IT changes our hearts, our minds and our natures.
 6. God doesn’t make demands, He works change through love.
 - a. When I met Christ one evening 27 years ago, I knew my life was messed up and that there were many things that I did wrong.
 - b. I really didn’t think about changing them when I was confronted with the Love of God that I had been rejecting for many years. I recall feeling broken over having rejected God’s pure love. I only knew that I didn’t want to reject God’s love any longer.
 - c. That night, God didn’t tell me that to become His child I would have to give up drinking or smoking or going to bars. He simply called me by name and made me his child.
 - d. And you know what? Over a period of time He gently took those vices away from me. HE cleaned me up. He made my outside begin to resemble the inside person He had recreated.
 - e. I am not able to brag that I am good because I don’t do that stuff any more. I am simply the result of God’s gentle, unconditional love that I finally stopped running from!
 - f. I still have stuff that doesn’t match the inside person, but God’s love is still working changes in my life.
- b. **God’s love is initiating love.**
- i. Channel 8 news recently had on one of their news programs a short story about when was the first time you told someone you liked that you “loved them.”
 1. They had some great stories and even a few good movie clips.
 2. As I thought about it though, telling someone that you love them for the first time carries with it an element of risk.
 - a. Do you hold your breath as you wait for a reaction, rejection or mere indifference?
 - b. Do you say “I love you” so the other person will say it back?

- c. Telling someone (first) that you love them is to offer yourself to them, to offer the gift of yourself, your emotions, your mind, your heart, to expose yourself to rejection.
 - d. And that is what God has done for us!!!!
 - ii. God does not wait for people to come asking for love and acceptance.
 - iii. God makes the first move, loving before people ask for love or even acknowledge their need for it.
 - 1. Long before we seek and turn to God, God seeks us out and turns to us.
 - 2. In fact, Jesus said, “*I have come to seek and to save the lost*” (Luke 19:10)
 - 3. In other words, He came to find us! That’s true love!
- c. **God’s love is faithful.**
 - i. God never takes back His promise to love us.
 - ii. Even when we are faithless, God remains faithful and true.
 - iii. We may turn away from God, but God never turns away from us.
 - iv. The offer to receive His love remains until the day we leave this earth.
 - v. Even then, His love will be manifested through the fact that He will not force us to spend eternity with Him.
 - 1. He loves us that much.
 - 2. True love leaves room for rejection.
 - vi. I have to believe that God is most grieved when someone chooses to spend eternity away from Him.
- d. **God’s love is reconciling love.**
 - i. Jesus commanded us to love our enemies not just our friends because that is the way God loves us:
 - 1. God loves those who have made themselves enemies of Him.
 - 2. He loves those who are self-declared atheists. He loves those who hate Him.
 - ii. Even when God confronts and judges our sinfulness, it is to heal rather than to hurt, restore rather than to defeat and destroy, reclaim rather than to get even and pay back. (II Cor. 5:19; Eph. 2:14)
 - iii. The goal of His love is to reconcile, to mend the relationship between us and Him, to draw us back and to restore what WE have broken.
- e. **God’s love is renewing love.**
 - i. It forgives and accepts us as we are, no matter what we may have done or not done.
 - ii. But God’s love does not leave us as we are.
 - iii. *God loves us enough to accept us the way we are, but too much to leave us that way.*
 - iv. God’s love is not a sentimental love that allows us passively to settle down in our sinfulness and self-oriented, self-destructive ways.
 - v. God’s love sets us on our feet and sets us on the way toward becoming strong, active, responsible people growing up into the character of Jesus Christ.(Eph. 4:13)

- f. **God's love holds nothing back.**
 - i. God was prepared to sacrifice His only Son. God was ready.
 - ii. There was nothing that would prevent Him from sacrificing His own Son so we can be with Him.
 - iii. There was no other way to reconcile us.
 - iv. God held back nothing, giving His very best so we could know Him and experience His love.

4. **If God loves me, why don't I feel like it?**

- a. Recently I heard a story about a dog that was abused nearly all of its early life. The dog was not fed properly and had bruises all over from beatings. Fortunately the dog was found by a kind man who took the dog in. The new owner treated the dog like a king washing and feeding it but it took years before the dog understood that it was loved.
 - i. Now several years had passed and the dog has completely changed, Instead of cowering when its master comes home it waits with anticipation.
 - 1. Instead of hiding when it has an accident it seeks the masters forgiveness and instead of avoiding his master the dog now actively seeks to spend time with the master.
 - ii. I think we can learn a lot from this dog.
 - 1. You see the dog did not understand that it was loved because it had a history of a horrible master.
 - 2. In the same way it would seem that many Christians have a poor understanding of who God is and therefore do not experience is love. We had a poor master (Satan) who taught us fear and religious abuse and taught us to cower.
 - 3. The sad thing is that even though we now have a new Master...
 - a. We cower rather than rejoice in Him
 - b. We hide rather than seek Him
 - c. We run rather than rest in Him
 - iii. When Jesus becomes our Master, we learn slowly that we are absolutely loved.

- 5. The point I am trying to make is that God is not mean but loving; He is not unjust but rather concerned about the condition of our walk with Him. A few things I want us to note:
 - a. One of the most devastating failures in a Christian's life is the inability to embrace the pure love of God.
 - b. What things prevents a believer from accepting His unconditional love?
 - i. **Our own love relationships**, including our parental, family and romance relationships.
 - 1. The way people treat us can distort how we understand God's love.
 - 2. As imperfect people, we exhibit imperfect love.
 - ii. **Guilt.**
 - 1. Our remorse over sinful behavior can subtly convince us that we are unworthy of God's love.

2. This is a trap of the Devil.
 3. We have the assurance of Scripture that the Father loves us completely, regardless of our actions.
- iii. Legalism and performance based living.
1. Many people view the Bible as a simple rule book—a collection of dos and don'ts.
 2. If you base your view of divine love on your ability to uphold every biblical precept, you are doomed to failure.
 3. God gave us His Word for instruction and inspiration, not as a measuring stick by which He distributes love.
- iv. Misinterpretation of divine discipline.
1. Make no mistake—God definitely disciplines His children when they go astray.
 2. However, He is a trustworthy Father; His discipline and love are intimately connected. Hebrews 12:5-6)
 3. He corrects our behavior when necessary for our benefit, not as a form of punishment.
 4. Jesus already paid the price for our sin; *God will not make us pay a second time.*
- c. God laid upon Jesus the punishment of every sin you ever committed or will commit. He saw the sins you would commit today and tomorrow.
- i. That didn't stop Jesus from dying for you.
 - ii. They are all under the forgiveness paid by the blood of Jesus.
 - iii. God does not love you based upon your performance.
 1. There is nothing you can do to cause God to love you any more than He already does—and there is nothing that will cause God to love you any less.
 2. He loves you, even more than you love yourself.
6. There is a story about a woman in India whose teenage daughter ran away from home. The mother grieved, because she knew that there was no way a young woman could make a legitimate living in the city. She knew her daughter would end up selling her body to find a place to sleep at night or to eat a meal each day. In spite of her grief, the mother wandered the streets of the city in search of her daughter, week after week, month after month. Finally in desperation, she went to one of those photograph kiosks and took several hundred pictures of herself. She wrote a short note on the back of each one and posted them all over the city. One day, the daughter, malnourished, tired and weak, saw a picture on a bulletin board that she recognized. She pulled the photo from the cork and looked at the back and found this note, "Come home just as you are. You are loved, Mom." She came home that day.

We all fear rejection or consequences, we build our value on our performance and diminish our value when we fail. But God sees our worth and value far beyond what we do. In a moment, I am going to show a video during our invitation. I am going to ask you to stand during this video. If the Holy Spirit touches you, I would like to encourage you to step out from your seat and kneel at the altar and to let God pour out His love upon you in a fresh way. If you desire prayer, I will be here to pray with you as well.

Let's pray.

Father, You loved us first. You loved us when we were running from You. Some of us are still running from You. Some of us have trouble believing you would still love us after all that we have done or failed to do. But your love only calls us home, because You want to fill us with Your life-changing love. OH God, I pray that we would LET you love us!!!! In Jesus Name Amen!!!!

Please stand.