

What is Love?¹

1 John 4:7-21

Introduction

He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not: “Murderer of Love” (HT Dan in Real Life). “I’m in love” — you’re 13. “I have butterflies in my stomach” — that’s gas, lay off the Taco Bell. HS Movie Date, don’t even remember her name (maybe it’s memory loss or maybe the things you think matter now don’t in the way you think). I love embarrassing young love (e.g., “what’s his middle name?”).

- We ask, “*Do* I love them,” when we need to ask, “*Should* I love them.” “There is no amount of relationship advice that can fix a relationship that shouldn’t exist” (Blade). A more fundamental question: “*What* is love?”

What is Love? (Baby Don’t Hurt Me):

- Throughout the history of art, cinema, and music, the dominant theme has been love. We *love* (verb) love (noun). It’s in all of our slogans, “Love wins.” “Love is love” (*tautology*; red is red). **I would argue that most of us *don’t* know what love is.** Our view of love is tepid (#weaksauce), culturally limited, self-centered, transactional, conditional, and fleeting.
- A lot of times, what we call love is really **self-gratification**. We love how someone else makes us feel, boosting our ego or reputation. We love what they do for us, etc. We don’t really love them, and we use them to love ourselves (when they stop giving us what we want, we stop loving them).
- Falling in love is an accident; walking in love is a choice. **True love gives itself away.**

We are called to reflect God’s love to others.

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. ¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not

¹ Baby Don’t Hurt Me

love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

1. The Origin of Love (vv. 7-8)²

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

Beginning, Middle, and End: ⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God,

- Even his term of endearment (Beloved) is a reminder that love originates from God. We don't generate love; we receive and reflect it.
 - He starts this section with the application (the goal) in mind (e.g., let us love one another). It is only possible to love others if we understand, receive, and reflect the love from God.
 - If you lack love for others, the only way to get it, is to fill your heart with the love Christ has for you.
- Beloved literally comes from Old English meaning "thoroughly, completely, or greatly loved." Because you and I have been loved, we can love others (e.g., Be loved; Be love).

Genetic Identity: and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God,

- The evidence of being born of God and truly knowing God is shown through love, *particularly* love for one another (other Christians).
- It's not just about **external behaviors** or trying harder to 'be good.' **Love is the natural outflow of someone who is born into God's family** (e.g., I don't have to try to look like my dad). "Who is your daddy and what does he do" (Arnold Schwarzenegger as Det. John Kimble, *Kindergarten Cop*, '90). Do you look like your father? Yes. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother (1 Jn 3:10).
- If you hear this and think, "I just need to go be good," you're missing the point. Yes, you do need to be good, but it's impossible without first being born of God. Acting good without being good is like tying apples from the grocery store onto a pine tree and calling it an apple tree. It's not. They're gonna die and rot. No more apples are on the way.
- Knowing God is not just intellectual—it's relational and transformative. This transformative knowledge of God changes who you are from the inside out. The more you know Him, the more you begin to resemble Jesus, not just in outward actions, but in heart, mind, and spirit.

Overflowing Love: love is from God... because God is love.

- We exist because of the eternal, pre-existent, overflowing love of our Triune God. Our eternal God exists in a loving relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit. The Father

² "Where Is the Love?" (The Black Eyed Peas, 2003)

has eternally loved the Son through the Spirit, and the Son responds in love to the Father by the Spirit (a perfect, harmonious relationship within the Godhead).

- God didn't lack anything, need anything, or desire anything external to himself. Yet he chose to create us! **Why?** Because he loved us.
- His pure desire to share his love results in our creation. He didn't need us, yet he chose to create us.
- My favorite definition of love: "it is good that you exist, good that you are in the world" (Pieper). That is, I am simply glad you are. I don't need you to *do something*, accomplish something, or give me something. You are simply a joy. That is how God loves us and calls us to love others.
- **If you don't understand and haven't experienced God's love, then you won't be able to love anyone but yourself, which isn't love; it's selfishness** (the very opposite of love).
- God is love (1 Jn 4:8, 16)³, **God is light** (1 Jn 1:5).⁴ **We don't define love; God does.** We don't decide what is loving and see if God measures up (e.g., "I can't believe in a God who..."). We see what God is and define love accordingly.
 - Love isn't defined by a feeling; it is defined by God.
- It's not just that God loves us (true), but "all his activity is loving activity. Whether he creates, rules, or judges, he does so in love. All that he does is the expression of his nature which is — love" (De Jonge).
- God is fully and completely love in its absolute and uncorrupted form, without defect or limitation. Whatever he is (i.e., love), he is that entirely and infinitely.⁵ His love is not dependent on anything outside of himself; it flows from his eternal nature.⁶ As such, it has no defects and does not change. It is undiluted and cannot fall short.⁷
 - All human love is derivative of God's love. Our longing for true love points us to God, who is that love (e.g., good dad or bad dad). He is the source and definition of love.
- **Is your understanding and definition of love shaped by the world or the Word? By popular culture or the actions of God? By your feelings or God's character?**

God is the source and definition of love and shows it to us most clearly in the person and work of Jesus.

2. The Definition of Love⁸ (vv. 9-10)

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

³ ὁ Θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν

⁴ ὁ Θεὸς φῶς ἐστίν. Slightly different than God is Spirit (Jn 4:24, πνεῦμα ὁ Θεός)

⁵ Divine Simplicity

⁶ Aseity

⁷ Immutability

⁸ "I Want to Know What Love Is" (Foreigner, 1984)

The Cost of Love: Love is a very abstract concept, but it doesn't need to be a mystery. God puts "flesh and bones" on the idea of love. He makes it visible, clear, and tangible through a specific action: the sending of Jesus Christ.

- ⁹ 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.
- ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. God is invisible! In Christ, the invisible God becomes visible. "Do you want to know what God is like? Do you want to know what God does, how he feels, what he delights in, what he is harsh toward? Look to Jesus" (Chandler). Jesus is God made visible, the self-expression of God. If you get Jesus wrong, you get God wrong (because Jesus is God). If you get God wrong, you get love wrong (because God is love).
- God demonstrated the **depth** of his love by the **price** of his gift. "Presents are the best way to show someone how much you care. It's like this tangible thing that you can point to and say, 'Hey man, I love you this many dollars worth'" (Michael Scott). How much is something worth? How much will someone pay for it (e.g., a Pokémon card, house, etc.)?
- God sent a unique, one-of-a-kind, priceless gift — his son. This isn't just his only son, but the only son like this in all of existence!⁹ The fewer there are of something (e.g., painting, gemstone, collectible), the more valuable it is. Jesus isn't just rare; **he is the only one**. He's in a league of his own.
- If you ever doubt God's love for you, consider the price he paid: The gospel is free by grace to believe and receive, but it is not cheap. "It is costly because it cost God the life of his Son, and what cost God much cannot be cheap for us" (Bonhoeffer).

Give Himself Away: ¹⁰ 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.

- ⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends (1 Cor 13:4-8a). Who loves like this? Only Jesus. Only he is perfectly patient and kind, keeping no record of wrongs, living for the good of others and not himself. This quality of love is seen fully and finally on the cross. "A love you cannot earn is a love you cannot lose" (Matt McCullough), and that love is only found in Jesus.
- **Propitiation:**¹⁰ **For God to be just, sin must be paid for; for God to be gracious, he pays for our sin.** Propitiation is Christ's sacrificial death that satisfies God's righteous wrath against sin and turns it away from us so we can receive his overflowing love.
 - One might "dare" consider sacrificing for a good person, but "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).
- If you or I ever truly love others, then we must recognize that we can't do it on our own. We can only "love because he first loved us" (v. 19).
 - We forgive because we've been forgiven. How much did Christ love you?

⁹ μονογενής Cf. Jn 1:14, 18, 3:16, 18, Heb 11:17.

¹⁰ ἱλασμός, call back to 1 Jn 2

- The secret to this love is Christ in you (Col 1:27). God is the source of love; we can only truly love because he loved us first. When we love like him, we are reflecting his gift of love to others!
 - Human love is incomplete. In its best form, it is like God's. We know when it falls short because it isn't God.
- Do you love like Christ? Or like the world? Love without expectation. Giving away without keeping score.

Because we have been loved like Jesus, we can reflect that love to the world.

3. The Direction of Love¹¹ (vv. 11-21)

¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. ¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Transformation: ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

- When we've **experienced** the love of God, we are able to love others. It **transforms** us. We realize that we are fully accepted, forgiven, and cherished by Him, not because of anything we have done, but because of His grace. This security frees us from the need to earn love or approval from others. Instead of seeking love to fill a void, we are already filled with God's love, which empowers us to love others without fear of rejection or loss.
- Knowing God is not just intellectual—it's relational and transformative. This transformative knowledge of God changes who you are from the inside out. The more you know Him, the more you begin to resemble Jesus, not just in outward actions, but in heart, mind, and spirit.¹²
 - I think a lot of us never get to this point. We spend all of our time asking *if* we're loved, but we never receive his love. Insecurity robs you of transformation. You can tell a person that goes from "Do they love me?" to "because they love me."

¹¹ What the World Needs Now Is Love (Jackie DeShannon, 1965)

¹² Bullpen, Jen Wilkin on the Greatest Commandment and the Good Samaritan. Jesus is the Samaritan, we are the man in the ditch. We have been loved extravagantly at great cost to our Savior.

- Experiencing God's sacrificial love through Christ redefines our understanding of love. Worldly love is self-serving and transactional; God's love is selfless and sacrificial. One of the most **counter-cultural** things you can do is love like this.

God Made Visible: ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. ¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

- The Bible calls us the body of Christ (*totus Christus*). As his church, we participate in Christ's life, death, and resurrection. He is fully present in his people, which means we are meant to be a visible manifestation of Christ to the world.
- We are called to participate in making the character and nature of God a visible reality through the way we love one another. Love that is pure, sincere, and mature, reflecting the fullness of God's love.
- Would someone be able to understand the love of God by looking at your life?

Know and Believe: ¹⁶ 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.

- This is what I want for you and what will transform you: to know and to believe the love that God has for you. Do you believe this? (Jn 11:26). It changes everything.
- This might feel **needlessly repetitive**, but it's not; it's **deliberately emphatic**. You can't "move on" until you get this. There is no way past it, and we miss it too much.

Fear and Love: ¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. ¹⁸ 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.

- Love grows in us as we know and believe in God and changes us, giving us confidence (boldness) that we are his!
- This confidence *frees* us to love **others** like Christ loved **us**, to risk loving others even when we might not receive their love in return. To love without fear. "It is astonishing how much ministry you are freed up to do when your heart starts getting its sense of glory and worth from Jesus and not all of the other equally insecure people you meet every day" (Rishmawy).
 - **We fear what we think can really damage us.** Irrational fears: clowns (*coulrophobia*), a duck or goose is watching you (*anatidaephobia*), peanut butter sticking to the roof of your mouth (*arachibutyrophobia*). These are mostly harmless.
- Maybe the deepest fear that affects us is **rejection** (goes all the way back to the garden of Eden when Adam and Eve hid from God's presence).
- "To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is [the love of God]. It is what we need more than anything" (Keller).

- Without this kind of acceptance and security, we can never experience true love or truly love others; we'll always hold back.
 - We are used to **transactional** love. "You scratch my back; I scratch yours" (#followforfollow).
- If God is who he says he is (sovereign, almighty, creator, sustainer, and ruler of all things), then he is the only one we should fear (which is why the Bible tells us to "Fear God"¹³). We *should* fear God. He judges the living and the dead!¹⁴
 - The beauty of the gospel is not that God **ignored** your sin but that he **paid** for it.
 - We rightfully deserve the punishment of God but we need not fear because he took that punishment on himself!
 - Fear and joy actually go together (e.g., roller coaster, real fear, real joy).
- **Fear is a type of worship.**
 - We give authority to what we fear. We submit to what we fear. It alters how we behave. If we fear people, we bend to their opinion of us rather than God's.
 - The only person who you should actually fear (God) loves you completely! "The only person in the universe whose opinion counts looks at me and finds me more valuable than all the jewels in creation" (Keller).
 - Because we have been perfectly loved by God, we have no fear of what other people think of us. We don't need to fear letting them down. Or fear their rejection. We can love them enough to tell them the truth instead of just what they want to hear.
- Who do you fear? Who holds the keys to your joy, security, and significance?

Love Others: Because **God is the source and definition of true love** when we've experienced his perfect love, we can love others like he has loved us.

- ²⁰ 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. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.
- It is anti-gospel to receive love, forgiveness, and grace but not show it to others.
 - If you claim to love God but refuse to love others, you are denying the value he has given them by making them in his image (Gen 1:27).
 - If you claim to love God but refuse to love other believers (his children), you are rejecting who he loves (like saying you love me but hate my wife).
 - If you claim to love God but refuse to share that love with others, the opposite of the gospel (e.g., givers vs. takers).
- Love for others is a natural reflection of the love of God. If you don't have love for others, then you haven't really experienced God's love.

Perfect Love: Perfect love casts out fear What would you do if you weren't afraid? How would you treat others? What risks would you take for the gospel?

- Because God's love is perfect, I don't need to be afraid.

¹³ Deut 6:13, 10:12, 20, 13:4, 31:12-13, Josh 24:14, 1 Sam 12:24, 2 Chr 19:7, Ps 2:11, 33:8, 34:9, 111:10, Prov 1:7, 9:10, 14:27, Eccl 12:13, Isa 8:13, Jer 5:22, Matt 10:28, Luke 12:5, 1 Pet 2:17, Rev 14:7

¹⁴ 2 Tim 4:1, Acts 10:42, 1 Pet 4:5

- Because God's love is perfect, I don't need my circumstances to be perfect.
- Because God's love is perfect, I don't need other people to be perfect.
- Because God's love is perfect, I don't need to be perfect.
- Because I have experienced God's perfect love I am free to shine, free to risk, free to go share the love of Jesus with others.

You've heard the truth: God is love. You've seen the proof: Jesus crucified and risen. Now receive the invitation to shine.

Conclusion

Shine: You were not made to sit on the sidelines of a broken world. You were made to *shine* in it, to reflect God's perfect love into the darkest places. To take the light you've received and carry it boldly into your schools, your families, your neighborhoods, and wherever God sends you.

- I came across the story of Ion Keith-Falconer. He was a Scottish nobleman in the late 19th century. Born into wealth and privilege, a world-class athlete and scholar,¹⁵ he could have lived a life of luxury. He could have spent his years in luxurious living, but his heart was captivated by the millions in the world who didn't know Christ. He was a gifted linguist and learned Arabic fluently. Instead of chasing fame or comfort, he moved to Arabia (modern-day Yemen), then one of the hardest and darkest places to bring the gospel, to reach the Muslim people of that region with the hope of Christ. In 1887, just barely into his ministry, Ion died of malaria at the age of 30. But before his death, he said: "I have but one candle of life to burn, and I would rather burn it out in a land filled with darkness than in a land flooded with light." Ion's life was short but shining, burning bright for the glory of God and the good of others. He's a model of what it looks like to be set free from the burdens and temptations of this world to shine the light of God in dark places.

Shine:

- If you've received the light of Christ, who needs that light from you?
- Into what dark place is God calling you to shine his light?
- If your life is a candle, where is God asking you to burn it for Him?

You have one candle. One life. Will you shine it for yourself, or for the one who loved you first and loves you perfectly?

Prayer:

Almighty God, because I have received your light, I will not hide it.

You have loved me with perfect love, so I am not afraid. I don't need to prove myself. I don't need to protect myself. I belong to you.

So send me. Into the darkness. Into the hard places where your love is unknown.

¹⁵ Cyclist

Let the candle of my life burn brightly, where you will, how you will, for your glory. Until everyone knows your good news, revealed in Christ. By the power of your Spirit, I will shine. Amen.