



We've said going through 1 John is like climbing a spiral staircase in which we keep coming around to the same things, but each time we do we get a little higher and see things we didn't see the last time around. Remember, the apostle John is trying to bring some assurance to his flock. They're under attack. People were leaving their church, claiming a special knowledge of God others didn't have, and that shook them. John cares deeply for them and he wants them to know that they, not the others who've left, are God's true children. To help them he gives them three tests or criteria by which they could judge.

First, the doctrinal test: Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God, God in the flesh, who came into the world to die for our sins? You can't claim to know God and deny that.

Second, the moral test: Do you obey the commands of God? No one obeys them perfectly, but you can't claim to know God and just disregard his commandments.

Third, the relational test: Do you love your brothers and sisters in Christ? This was the primary command Jesus gave his followers. The people who had left didn't love their brothers and sisters; they rejected them. How could they be of God?

Repeatedly, as he goes upwards on this spiral staircase, John comes back to these three tests. His purpose isn't to bring doubt over where they stand with God, but to bring assurance and confidence.

Today we're looking at a passage that begins in 1 John 4:7 and ends in 5:5. In this passage, all three of these tests show up, but the focus is on the third test: the love test. The word "love" shows up no less than 32 times in this text! Three times we're told to love one another (verses 7, 11, 12). This isn't the first time he's talked about love. He's already talked about it back in 2:7–11 and 3:11–18. What could he possibly say about love that he hasn't said before?

A lot! In this passage, John leads us up to the very pinnacle of love. It's like he stands on Mt. Everest and gazes around for just a few moments. It's a clear day and he can see for miles and miles. What he's able to see that he hasn't seen before isn't just the importance of love, but the origin of love, the manifestation of love, the perfection of love and the power of love. And each of these ideas have at their very center the person of God. The word "God" is all over this passage; God is mentioned 27 times. We

also hear of the Spirit of God and the Son of God so we have a Trinitarian passage as well.

It's almost like the deeper we get into this letter, the more we learn about love; not our love for others but God's love for us. Really, that's the foundation for everything, isn't it? At some point in your life you'll be faced with the question of if God really loves you. Someone close to you will have an accident, or you'll lose your job, or a child will walk away from the faith, or your ministry will fail. And you'll ask, where was this God who loves me when that happened? John will answer that question.

The Origin of Love

John begins by saying God is the origin and source of love. Look at verses 7–8.

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

Why should we love one another? Because of who God is. He says it twice—first, for love comes from God and second, because God is love. So, not only does all true love come from God, he's love in his inmost being. There are three other statements in the New Testament that tell us what God is: God is spirit (John 4:24); God is light (1 John 1:5); God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29). These statements all tell us something about God's essential nature. All these things are true of God at the same time. The One who is spirit, light and fire is love as well.

One of the criticisms Muslims have of Christianity is that by believing in the Trinity we believe in three Gods. That's not true, of course. We believe in one God who manifests himself in three persons. You see, if it's true that God is Love, the Trinity makes perfect sense. For love to exist there needs someone who is doing the loving, and someone who is being loved. You can't love when you're just by yourself. Focusing only on myself is egotism, not love. Yes, there's only one God but this God is relational because he is love. So there needs to be interaction of giving and receiving within the Godhead. That's why the Trinity makes sense.

Let's face it, this idea that God is love is often misunderstood. The Bible says God is love, but it doesn't say love is God. As we'll see in a moment, love doesn't define God, God defines love. Love doesn't even exist outside of God. Our society worships what they call "love" but what they call "love" has nothing to do with God. God's love is a holy love. Even in his judgment, there's

love. If you've ever disciplined your child, you know how that can be true.

When we're in the midst of difficult times, we're tempted to doubt God's love. Our enemy loves to add fuel to the fire by whispering in our ear, "If God really loved you, he wouldn't allow that to happen." But it's precisely in those times the reality that God is love can sustain us.

In the fall of 2000, doctors diagnosed Pastor Ed Dobson with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease), an incurable and fatal disease. They gave him two to five years to live and said he'd spend most of that time disabled. After he was diagnosed, Ed wanted someone to anoint him with oil and pray for healing. So he invited a pastor-friend who had regular healing services, to come and pray for him. Here's how Ed described what happened: "It was one of the most moving evenings of my entire life. He began by telling stories of people he had prayed for who were miraculously healed. He also told stories about people he'd prayed for who weren't healed and had passed away, receiving that ultimate and final healing. Before he prayed for me he gave me some advice. 'Don't become obsessed with getting healed, Ed. If you get obsessed [with getting healed], you'll lose your focus. Get lost in the wonder of God, and who knows what he'll do for you.'" Dobson writes, "This is some of the best advice I've ever received. Since that night, I've been trying to get—and stay—lost in the wonder of God." The thing that will get you through the toughest times, is to get lost in the wonder of God's love.

The Manifestation of Love

But then John moves from God's eternal nature as love to the way that love has been manifested by God. He moves from eternity to history. The God who is love, loved us. Look at verses 9–11.

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. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

So, again, our call to love one another is rooted in God. In this case, it's rooted in God's demonstration of love in history. The sending of God's only Son was both the revelation of his love (This is how God showed his love...) as well as the very essence of love itself (This is love...). Notice it's not our love that got this thing started. It's not like we reached out to God in love and he responded. No! God's love came first. His love is free, uncaused and spontaneous, and our love is just a response.

How do you know someone loves you? Because they tell you they love you? The only reason we know God is love is because of what he did in history. What did he do? This is captured in three things John says. First, "he sent his one and only Son into the world." God had no other Son but Jesus. He's completely unique.

There's no greater gift God could give. That's why Paul calls him "God's indescribable gift" (2 Cor. 9:15). But that's not all. Not only did he send his Son, he sent his Son to die for us. John says he sent his Son into the world as an "atoning sacrifice that we might live through him." He died on the cross to pay for our sins so we might live, not just exist, but live! He's talking about spiritual life—eternal life—which starts now! Finally, the greatness of his love is seen in who it is God sent his Son to die for. He gave his Son to die for undeserving little rebels who wanted nothing to do with him. God loves those who are unworthy of his love and really deserved judgement.

In all relationships—marriage, parent-child, co-workers—at some point you get into a conversation like this: "You're to blame!" "No, it's your fault!" "No, it's you." "No, it isn't. It's you." What's happening? The relationship is falling apart because no one will take the blame. Neither side will admit wrong or drop defenses. And as long as our defenses are up, the relationship stays broken.

But then sometimes this happens: "You're to blame!" "No, it's your fault!" "No, it's you." "No, it isn't. It's you." "Okay, it's me. I was wrong." One person drops defenses. The relationship can heal because someone is willing to sincerely say, "Yeah, it's me. I'm to blame here." One person makes himself vulnerable, and the relationship is restored. It can even become deeper and more intimate than before. Why would a person do that? Because of love. In the midst of all the hostility, he decides he wants the other person back. He wants the relationship to be restored. The only way to do that is take down the shield and become vulnerable. C. S. Lewis said, "Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable."

The gospel says that's what God did. Almighty God came into the world as a baby and then died on the cross. God became breakable and fragile. God became someone we could hurt. Why? Because of love. He wanted us back. And what John is saying is if you believe this and take in the truth of what he did for you—how loved and affirmed you are—you'll be able to let down your defenses in your own relationships with others. You won't always need to guard your honor. You'll be able to let the barriers down. You'll be able to love.

The Perfection of Love

This is what John gets into next as he talks about the perfection of love in verses 12–21. John has gone from the eternal to the historical and now he focuses on the continuous activity of love

in and through us, what I'm calling the perfection of love. I call it that because twice in these verses John speaks of God's love being completed or perfected in us. The first time we see it is in verses 12-16.

No one has ever seen God; 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. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

This is John's logic. No one has ever seen God in his essence. In the Old Testament people may have seen God's glory or a manifestation of God as the angel of the Lord, but no one has seen him as he is in himself. But John makes an astounding claim! If we love one another, the unseen God reveals himself in us, and I believe when he says "us" he means in our life together as his people. God's love for us is only perfected when it's reproduced among us. And notice how the Holy Spirit is involved in this. John says he's given us of his Spirit and in that sense he lives in us and we live in him. But how do we know that? How do we know that's true of us? Because we've come to see and believe that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. You see, love and truth go together. But not only that, we also know because we love one another. Remember, the fruit of the Spirit is... what? Love is at the beginning of that list for a reason.

So this is how God's love is perfected. It's like giving someone a gift. It's not enough just to give them a gift. You intend for them to open the gift and to enjoy the gift. That's the completion and the perfection of the gift. You give someone a shirt and what happens if you never see them wear it? You think, they didn't like that shirt. They said they liked it; they pretended to like it, but I never see him wear it. God has given us the gift of his love in the person of his Son, and the completion and the perfection of that gift comes only when we love one another.

But that's not all. God's love is also perfected in us in another way. Look at verses 17-21:

This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

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.

Notice again he talks about how love is completed or perfected in us. Love is completed in us when we have confidence in the day of judgement. Love is completed in us when we no longer fear God's punishment. It is right to reverence God. The Bible talks about a healthy fear of God that is akin to reverence. But there's another kind of fear; a cringing, cowering kind of fear, and that isn't healthy. God's perfect love drives out that kind of fear.

I have a little dog named Daisy. Daisy was a rescue dog. We got Daisy in Richmond but before that she lived on the streets of Long Beach. As far as we can tell, Daisy had a rough start. We know she had a litter of puppies, but we also know because every time we approach her she cowers and cringes, like we're going to hit her. But we don't hit our dog. We love our dog. We brought her into our house. We feed her and bathe her. She sleeps in our room at night. We take her on walks. But when I approach her, she still cringes; she still cowers. And in that sense our love for Daisy has not been completed or perfected.

God wants us to know that his Son took all the punishment that was required. We no longer need to cringe and cower in his presence. He wants us to know that, *"in this world we are like Jesus"* (v. 17b). I take that to mean in our standing before God, we're like him. We don't always act like him as we should, but God sees us in him. We're sons and daughters of God through him. Jesus called him Father, and so may we. We have the same confidence before God he had because we're in him. And, again, when that love is perfected in us so we have that confidence that will free us up to love not only God but others.

The Power of Love

Finally, this brings us to what I will call the power of love. Look at the first few verses of chapter 5.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God (verses 1-5).

Here you can see how the three tests I spoke of when I started are woven together. You can't separate loving others from believing in Jesus and you can't separate believing in Jesus from keeping his commands. Twice John mentions the idea of being born of God. How do you get to be born of God? Through faith in

Jesus. How do we know we have faith in Jesus? By loving others who have been born of God and keeping his commands.

Then he makes an intriguing statement: his commands are not burdensome. Why? Is it because they're easy to keep? I don't think so. Jesus didn't lower the bar, he raised it. He even said, *"Be perfect...as your heavenly Father is perfect"* (Matthew 5:48). They're not burdensome because they're easy, but rather because God himself equips us to keep them. Through faith in Jesus you're born of God. That means you become a new person. That means you know this love he has for you. That means he's placed his Spirit within you. And through all that you overcome the world. Remember how John described the world in chapter two: The lust of the eyes: the lust of the flesh and the pride of life? How do you overcome that? By faith in Jesus because when you have faith in Jesus you get a new heart and a new source of power. That's the power of God's love in your life. So you don't have to walk around as a defeated Christian. You can love the way God loved you.

Last weekend I saw this at work in my own life. Lynn and I were back in Chicago, where our son is playing football at Wheaton College. Now Wheaton is a fine evangelical institution. Billy Graham was once the president there. It's like the blue blood center for evangelicals. But before the football game there's a tradition where all the parents gather and pray and then form a tunnel for the team to come out on the field. Well, last Saturday I noticed there was a priest hanging out with the parents. He had the robes on and the whole nine yards. I thought that was a little odd but I knew a few of the kids on the team were from that background. He seemed to be very much at home, kind of hobnobbing with everyone, and then when we all gathered to pray someone asked him to pray.

Now you have to understand, I was raised in the Catholic church so it's not like I've never met a priest before, or even heard one pray. But I was still more than a little bit surprised that this guy was hanging out at a Wheaton College football game, and now he was going to lead the whole gang in prayer! So all my pride

buttons are being pushed. I mean, they could have asked me to pray; I'll give them a real evangelical prayer! But then he prayed and when he prayed I realized this is my brother in Christ. It was a beautiful, heartfelt prayer filled with faith and love for Jesus. Then after the game Lynn and I ended up sitting with him at the banquet for senior players, and he was just like the greatest guy who kind of oozed Jesus the whole time.

Honestly, I couldn't help but love the guy. Once I got over my stupid pride, it wasn't burdensome to love him at all. I'm sure there are lots of things we disagree on, but not Jesus. God's love in me overcame my pride. This is what John is saying. We're to love the members of the family, wherever they are. Our brother is he who shares the life of Jesus, who is born of God, who believes Jesus is the Christ. As John says, *"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well."*

The truth is, the more we experience and know God's love, the easier it will be to love others who know him too. It doesn't matter if they're Catholic or homeless or whatever. What we have to do is practice what I would call spiritual breathing. Every day we have to learn to breath in God's love for us. That should be the first order of business for you each day. Spend time with God and remind yourself of his love—breath it in. There is no fear in that love. No cringing; no cowering before God. He loves you; he died for you. Even in the midst of the hardest trial, that's true because God is love and God never changes. And don't just do it in the morning, do it throughout the day. But then breath out, and breathing out is like letting that love he has for you be directed towards others. Don't try to love them on your own. Love them with the same love with which he's loved you. The more we experience his love, the easier it will be to love others who know him too.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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