

LET US LOVE ONE ANOTHER

1 John 4:1-21

Key Verse: 4:7

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.”

“Let us love one another” is the main theme of 1 John. John began to speak about love in chapter 2. He said, “Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light...But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness” (2:10-11). In chapter 3, John tells how we know what love is through Jesus’ self-sacrificing love. Anyone who receives this love crosses over from death to eternal life and is also obligated to love others in actions and truth. Now, in chapter 4, John further develops his theme of love by explaining that it originates in God’s nature, is demonstrated in Christ, and is made complete in Christian fellowship.

In 3:23 John summarized God’s command in two parts: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another. In chapter 4, John teaches us how we can obey this command. In verses 1-6, he helps us to believe in Jesus truly by discerning the Spirit of truth from the spirit of falsehood. In verses 7-21, he emphasizes why we love one another and inspires us to do so. There is a very close connection between believing in Jesus Christ and loving others with God’s love. Those who truly believe in Jesus can genuinely love others. Faith and love are like two sides of the same coin. They cannot be separated. In Galatians 5:6b, Paul said, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” In chapter 4, the word “love” appears 27 times. It is all about love, especially loving one another. Why did John emphasize loving one another? It is because this is what God wants us to do. It is the way to have fellowship with God and with others continually. Furthermore, it is the way of resisting the deception of Satan through false teaching. And it is the way to shine the light of Christ in this dark world. Let’s learn how to love one another.

First, how to recognize the Spirit of God (1-6). In verses 1-6 John helped believers to discern the Spirit of truth from the spirit of falsehood. The spirit

of falsehood works through the attractive teachings of false prophets. If we are led astray by them, the consequences will be profoundly serious. These days there are so many religious teachings available through the Internet. We need to know the spirit behind a teacher or teaching. Verse 1 says, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." In the Old Testament, prophets were God's servants who delivered his messages to people. True prophets did not speak their own ideas. They spoke only God's messages. Sometimes they encouraged people with God's promises and hope. But other times they told people to repent, rebuking them for their sins. True prophets were misunderstood and even persecuted because they wanted to please God, not people. However, false prophets said only the good words that people wanted to hear. They perverted the words of God and manipulated people's trust for their own benefit. This is why God told his people to test the prophets to see if they came from God or not (Deut 13:1-5). We tend to believe uncritically any teaching that is "spiritual." But John said, "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits." "Test" means to determine whether something is genuine or counterfeit. Every believer is responsible to test the spirits. People can wander from the truth. Why? It happens when they do not study the Bible seriously. We can learn from the Bereans. After listening to Paul's messages, they carefully examined the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true (Ac 17:11). In the same way, we must examine whether teachings come from God or not.

Verse 2 says, "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God." In John's time a false teacher named Cerinthus claimed that the Spirit of God came upon Jesus at his baptism but left him before his crucifixion, so that he did not die as the Son of God. In fact, Cerinthus denied the full humanity of Jesus. Acknowledging that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh means that we accept Jesus' full humanity and his full deity as the incarnate God. In other words, Jesus is the perfect man and the perfect God (1Ti 2:5).

What does it mean to acknowledge this? This is not merely to give intellectual assent but to publicly confess our faith in Jesus and commit ourselves to him. Every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of antichrist (3). In our time, there are so many antichrists who

lead people astray. How can we discern them? We do not need to study every kind of false teaching extensively. We just need to confess that Jesus is fully God and fully man. Anyone who denies Jesus' humanity or Jesus' deity is an antichrist and we should reject their teaching. In addition to the false teaching John is dealing with in this passage, there are other false teachings which try to pervert Christian doctrines. These essential doctrines are summarized in the Apostle's Creed, which we recite every Sunday, and have been proved authentic down through the generations. When we deeply grasp the truths in the Apostle's Creed, we gain spiritual discernment to hold onto the truth and fight against false teachings.

Since there are many false prophets who have the spirit of antichrist, believers may feel overwhelmed. In verses 4-6 John gives them great assurance. There are three pronouns we need to pay attention to: "you," "they," and "we." "You" refers to John's audience--believers who had remained faithful to Jesus. "They" refers to false teachers who renounced faith in Jesus and left the church following antichrist. "We" refers to the authentic apostles, including John. Verse 4 says, "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." The words "from God" mean that these believers had been born of God through the Holy Spirit and they belonged to God. The Holy Spirit dwelt in them. They had already discerned and rejected the false teachings and had overcome Satan's deceptions. It was not by their own wisdom or strength, but by the work of the Holy Spirit within them. The Holy Spirit is wiser and stronger than Satan (Mk 3:27). Anyone who trusts in the Holy Spirit can win the victory over Satan.

In verses 5-6 we can find a clear contrast between "they" and "we." As mentioned, "they" are false teachers and "we" are the apostles, including John. "They" are from the world. Therefore they speak from the viewpoint of the world. They are overly sensitive to intellectual, social, and political trends, but are not concerned about the truth. They speak what people want to hear and become extremely popular in the world. They do not teach right and wrong and never challenge anyone to repent. They are very skillful in justifying evil deeds and soothing people's consciences through psychological counseling. This is why people listen to them. On the other hand, apostles are from God. They speak the truth about God: God is light; God is holy and

righteous; God is love, which is self-sacrificing. God wants us to have fellowship with him and to grow to be like him. This is why apostles challenge people to come out of the darkness, repent of their sins, and learn to love others with God's love. This teaching is not popular in the world. The world does not listen to the apostles, and even hates and persecutes them. On the other hand, whoever knows God listens to the apostles. This is how we recognize the spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

Second, why we should love one another (7-21). In verses 1-6 we learned how important it is to believe that Jesus is fully God and fully human. Only those who have such genuine faith are born of God. This genuine faith is expressed through practicing God's love in the Christian community. In verses 7-21 John tells us why we must love one another and inspires us to do so. In this part the phrase "love one another" is repeated three times (7,11,12), but each time the basis for doing so is different: in verses 7-8 it is God's nature, in verses 9-11 it is God's action, and in verses 12-21 it is Christian fellowship.

First of all, we should love one another because it is God's nature (7-8). Verses 7-8 say, "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." The phrase "Dear friends" is repeated three times in this passage (1,7,11). It is from the Greek word "*agapētos*," which means the object of one's affection, beloved. This expression indicates that John loved them dearly as a parent loves his child. He was practicing what he was teaching. Out of love, he exhorted them, "Let us love one another." Then he explained why. It is because love comes from God and God is love. Since God is love in his very nature, everything he does is marked by this love. God's justice is carried out in love; God's truth is taught in love; God's salvation work is done in love. We need to remember that every time the word "love" appears in this chapter, it is from agape--God's self-sacrificing love. God is the source and origin of this love. This love purely seeks the benefit of the beloved and is unconditional, holy, and self-sacrificing; it is also everlasting. This love derives from God alone. Everyone who loves with this love has been born of God and knows God. To know God is to have fellowship with God. On the other hand, whoever does not love does not know God; they cannot have fellowship with God.

When we hear John's stark contrast between those who love and those who do not love, it seems that those without God's love have no love at all. We may wonder, "Do parents not love their children without God's love?" Usually, parents' love is considered the highest form of human love. We need to distinguish between this kind of love and God's love. Generally, parents' love is genuine and sacrificial. They want to give everything to their children. But if this love does not come from God, it is limited; in fact, it is self-love and can even be harmful. For example, if children are not thankful or respectful, parents may feel empty and that their effort was in vain. Then they can become bitter and resentful toward their children, and the relationship sours. On the other hand, if the parents love their children with God's love, they can love unconditionally. They experience freedom to sacrifice and serve without any expectations. Then they grow in God's love. They can be happy and find meaning. Then their children feel God's love from their parents, and they are happy. When one of my sons did not live up to my expectations, I reached a human limitation in loving him. That was the very time that God began teaching me to love him with God's love. It was the time to learn the heart of the father of the prodigal son, and our good shepherd Jesus, who laid down his life for us. As I began to love my son with God's love, he also opened his heart. Our relationship has become deeper. During this pandemic, we have studied the Bible together every week. God's great love has worked where mere human love fell short. I know it is possible for all of us to love one another with God's love.

Secondly, we should love one another because God showed his love among us (9-11). Verse 9 says, "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." Though love is in the very nature of God, if God does not express this love, we cannot know it. So God demonstrated his love in an astonishing way. If we say to our spouse, "I love you," they are thankful. But sometimes they may say, "prove it." So we bring a present. Unless the present reflects real understanding and genuine sacrifice, it may not be persuasive. However, God's present is very persuasive. God's love is beyond our imagination. It is so amazing that we can hardly believe it. God sent his beloved one and only Son so that we might live through him. God gave us what we desperately needed: eternal life. For this, God sacrificed his Son's life. Verse 10 says, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning

sacrifice for our sins.” It was God who initiated love by sending his Son. This was a great sacrifice for God. Yet God gave even more--he gave his Son’s life as a ransom for us. Who can sacrifice their beloved child like this? We do not deserve this sacrifice. We were terrible sinners who were destined for eternal condemnation. But God demonstrated his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Ro 5:8). This is God’s love for us. Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (11). Loving one another is not burdensome, because God’s love inspires us to do so.

Thirdly, we should love one another so that God’s love is made complete in our Christian fellowship (12-21). Verse 12 says, “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 verse tells us that we can experience God’s love by loving one another. When we know God’s love, we should practice God’s love toward others. Then God lives among us and his love grows to maturity in our Christian community. Some people think of everything from an individual perspective, as though it is all about God and me. If God loves me and I love God, that is enough. But it is not. We cannot fully experience God’s love without the Christian community. When we practice God’s love among brothers and sisters, it is made complete and we are satisfied. Verse 13 tells us how we can be sure that God lives in us and we in God: “This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.” The Holy Spirit enlightens our hearts so that we may be sure of God’s love.

In verse 14 “we” refers to the apostles, including John. The Apostles had seen and testified that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. When they testified about Jesus, those who accepted Jesus as their Savior and confessed him as the Son of God also entered into fellowship with God. From the time the apostles testified, the message of Christ has been proclaimed down through the generations through the work of the Holy Spirit. Now it has touched each of our lives and drawn us into fellowship with the Father and the Son. In verse 16 the words “know and rely on” literally mean “have come to believe.” Living in the atmosphere of mutual Christian love produces a personal knowledge of God’s love and fresh experience of faith in that love. Since God is love, whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in them. We can experience God’s presence by loving one another in the Christian community because God is love.

In verses 17-18, John tells us that if we love one another, we have confidence to stand before God on the day of judgment. This confidence is grounded upon the fact that in this world we are like Jesus. To be sure, we are not like Jesus in our holiness. But we are like him in having the assurance of God's love as his beloved children. Since we are born of God, we are the objects of God's love. As Jesus called God "Father," we also call God "Father." In this respect we can have the same confidence as Jesus. Before being born again, we could not come to God or stand before him because we were so fearful. Fear is a symptom of sin. When we commit sin, we lose peace in our hearts and dread God's inevitable punishment. Whenever something bad happens, we assume it is because of our sins and become fatalistic. But God's perfect love drives out fear and gives us true rest and peace. This is the powerful work of God's love that we experience when we love one another. Now, we can come to God with confidence. Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Dear friends, now we can love one another! It is because God first loved us (19). If God did not initiate love, we would have neither a concept of genuine love nor the strength to love. But God's love inspires us to love one another. If someone says they love God but hate their brother or sister, they are liars (20a). John said, "Whoever does not love their brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen" (20b). Loving God and loving brothers and sisters cannot be separated. If we love God, we can love others. In fact, loving others is God's command: "Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister" (21).

God is love. Though Satan wants to destroy and divide us, God's love saves us, heals us, builds us up and unifies us. We can experience God's love when we love one another. We have learned that we should love one another because it is God's nature, God has demonstrated his love to us in Christ, and it makes God's love complete in our Christian fellowship. Let us practice loving one another. This is how we can build up a loving community and shine the light of Christ in this dark world.