

God Is Love

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[0 : 00] And we're going to look this morning at the second kind of leg, a foundation of this letter that John is writing to the churches and it's God his love, God his light we saw last night.

And just before we do that, I want to stop for a moment for you to think about the character of John the beloved disciple who's written these epistles.

Because his character comes through, and remember this is God's word, we recognize it as God's divine inspired inerrant word. But he worked through people. He worked through individuals and all the letters and all the different parts of the Bible reflect the character and the characters of those who wrote them.

And there are a couple of things I think we can learn from the character of John that are I think by way of introduction helpful for us. We kind of mentioned it last night a little bit as well, but in this particular letter and indeed in the other two that he writes, he just can't stop repeating himself. He's repeating himself all the time. And it's not that he's forgetful, it's not that he's been annoying, it's not that he doesn't have something, it can't think of what to say.

[1 : 18] But it's because he is focused as he speaks to a young church that's been attacked by false teaching and then is divided and struggling.

Every verse is really important to him, that's why he keeps saying it's so important. And every verse is jam-packed with astonishing truth. And he wants to focus on what's really important, keeping the main things, the main things, that's what he wants to do, what Christ has done for him, what Christ has done for them.

And he wants them to recognize it's much bigger than just a set of theological beliefs or something that you can argue about with these false teachers.

It's just the very heart and soul of everything that he knows and everything he's experienced through his knowledge of Jesus Christ, the message that he's been entrusted with that we saw last night.

And every verse, though it's repeated, a lot of things repeated, it's like a diamond. And as you move the diamond about and with his edges, it reflects different colors and reflects different hues.

[2 : 29] And that's very much what he's doing, he's wanting us to look at the truth of Jesus' love and the character of God from all these different angles. And I think if we had that same passion and that same repetitive focus in our lives, then I'm sure I know that my preaching would be different.

Our praise would be different. Our prayer life would be different. Out on bridal joy and knowing and loving and serving Jesus Christ. Whatever the circumstances, and remember these early churches, they weren't living in a bed of roses, their lives were difficult, there was persecution and trouble and opposition, like wolves were coming to attack them.

And so it was tough being a Christian, but yet I think the roof of this building would be blown off if we were able to see things in the same way that John and these young lads would really have a work to do to fix the roof if that happened.

But so he can't stop repeating himself, but also there's this, it's like a holy obsession. He has a holy obsession with Christ and with the person of God in his life.

Obsession, yes, can either be a positive or a negative thing, but the dictionary definition is an idea or a thought that continually preoccupies or intrudes on a person's mind.

[3 : 52] And that's exactly what John had. He had this truth that weighed heavily in his life and in his heart and in his mind that he shared. It governed his whole life.

It changed everything for him. It transformed all his thinking. It was very big to him. It wasn't like an appendix in his life.

It wasn't an added extra. It wasn't just the icing on the cake. It was everything for him, really significant. And maybe it would be worthwhile ourselves today just to look in the mirror spiritually and ask what our obsession is.

What is it that is an idea or a thought that continually preoccupies or intrudes on our minds? What's the big focus of our lives?

Because as believers we're called to have Christ central to everything that we are and everything that we do because he transforms us. Why is that? Because when you walk out of here, you walk out of here with your heart beating.

[4 : 55] You walk out of here, wherever you go, wherever you look in the mirror, wherever you're at work, wherever you're at home, you're there. And if you're there as a Christian then Christ is there. And Christ is in our hearts and He's with us wherever we go.

Don't just unpack Him on a Sunday morning and take Him out and then stick Him back in a cupboard for the rest of the week. It's not how it works. Christ is our all and all.

He's everything that we are and everything that we do is in this relationship with Him and that's what John is trying to get across. And the other thing about Him briefly is He's just sharp as a tack. He's no mug. He's no fool. John is sharp as a tack. He knows exactly what's happening with these false teachers. They're coming in and they're teaching false doctrine and it's causing division and hatred and separation between the believers.

And He knows that they are wolves. He knows that they are wolves and sheep's clothing. He knows they're liars, they're deceitful, they're divisive and they're unconcerned by the damage they're causing among the Christians in these young churches.

[6 : 04] And what He knows therefore is that what's in our hearts is what comes out in our lives. That's what He's really focusing all the time on with these people.

And He says, it doesn't matter what we think we believe or what we say we believe, it's what's in our hearts that will come out that will reflect actually the belief that we have.

So if I had a bottle of water today and the lid was off it and I squeezed it or I shook it, what's going to come out?

Water. So what's in there comes out. And so when we are squeezed or we're shaken or we're persecuted or something comes into our lives that's difficult, then that will, what's in our hearts will reflect how we respond, how we react.

And if Christ is there then we'll react in a Christ-like way. And if He's not there then we'll lose our temper or we'll say something we regret or we'll turn our backs on the living God.

[7 : 09] Because what's in our heart will always come out when we're shaken, when we're stirred, when we're squeezed, when we're squeezed with persecution or difficulty or circumstances that are hard for us.

So the challenge is always to look into our own hearts. The gospel challenge is not to look into other people's hearts, it's not to see what the person next to us is doing. It's to look, God always, His light always shines in our hearts.

And it's so preoccupied that we have no time to complain about others because we recognize how much we need Christ and how much we need His forgiveness in our lives. So He goes on then to speak about God's character, who God is, that God is love and that that is reflected in our understanding of the gospel.

So it's not that God loves, it's not that occasionally He is His character, He loves other people, it's that He is love, that He's the author, the Genesis, the Creator of love.

In His being, He is love. It's one of God's, John's great statements, isn't it? God is light, God is love, He also says God is spirit in His gospel.

[8 : 21] So there's this reality that God is this infinite, eternal and unchangeable source of love from which all our love derives, but we can't know it because sin has disordered our loves.

So even the best of our loves can't be a love that allows us our relationship with God until our sins are dealt with.

But this is His character, God is love. And I think at that level, to be theological, just for a moment, it sparks in our minds the reality, the importance of the Trinity, that God is a society of love, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.

Wasn't it God was living eternally in some kind of isolated, lonely experience, thought, well, I need to create humanity because I need someone to love? It wasn't like that.

He would be incomplete. He wouldn't be God if that were the case. There's a unique simplicity and complexity in His amazing love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit in that triune love relationship, perfect relationship without hatred, without division, without jealousy, without anything that would cause division.

[9 : 40] And that basis that we see that our salvation is a cooperative one. It's not just some kind of idea as it were, and I realize I'm kind of going beyond my understanding here.

God is one, but yet there was a cooperative reality about coming to be our Savior. It's the divine initiative in this love, verse 10, not that we have loved God, but He loved us and sent His Son to be a propitiation.

Or verse 19, where He says, we love because He first loved us. It was His idea first, and it was His idea in that divine cooperative between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

God's idea, God's salvation, wrought in the mind and in the discussions of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit before creation. Our salvation, His idea within the three persons, agreed, all with a role to play, all with something significant to do, driven by His love for a people that He would create who would rebel against Him.

They're always being in His heart. It comes from Him first. It's not great today. Nobody cares about us in this world which we live.

[11 : 04] We'll come and go. We'll die and we'll be forgotten in a couple of few years. But God, before the beginning of the world, had you and His plan and me and His plan to provide a redeemer for us through Himself in all the mystery that that speaks about.

And therefore when we're saved, when we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are brought into this elevated company as believers, we are reborn into His company and all that that means.

We live as Christians through Him. Verse 9, He speaks about it. In fact, the whole passage goes on about that. The love of God is made manifest among us.

God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through Him. So you and I live through our relationship with God. There's this mutual indwelling. Verse 13, we know that we abide in Him and He in us because He has given us life.

Who by His Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God? Or again in verse 14, He said, we testify to the Father, I sent His Son to be the Savior of the world and we are in relationship with Him.

[12 : 21] So today, an ordinary little Christian that nobody really notices, we're engulfed and brought into the trinitarian life of God.

We're in fellowship with God the Father through the work of Son and dwelt by the Holy Spirit. You know, we'd like to, I don't know if you've got any, a hero or a heroine, someone in your life that you would love to meet, it would be great.

Someone you've always looked up to, maybe it's a sports star or maybe it's, I don't know, it could be anything, maybe it's a great, great electrician or an amazing joiner or something like that or just someone that you really admire.

That's maybe famous though and really well known. Can you imagine if they invited you somehow, invited you into their home and say, come and stay with us and meet the family and come and belong.

Imagine how great that would be if someone really looked up and said, I've been invited to their house, I'm going to speak with them. But it's like that a million times over, infinitely times greater that we've been invited into God's family, God's person that we're united with God with all the benefit.

[13 : 39] More than that, we're adopted. That's the language we're adopted into his family. We're called his child just as almost a parallel god, the sun.

We've got that amazing reality and when we're struggling with things, we've got a, you know, alcoholics anonymous talk about the poor me's.

Very often the alcoholics, when they're struggling to recover, they'll go into this mode of the poor me's where they complain and say everything's terrible and it's difficult and so they want to reach out for a drink.

We can be like that as well, we can have the poor me's. And so it's important to remember who we are in Christ and God's love for us when we're aging, when we're sore bones, when we've been let down, when we've had a bad diagnosis, when others have failed us, when we're struggling financially, whatever it might be.

We have to recalibrate our lives towards Jesus Christ and what we have in Him and we're to know and rely on Him. We're to live in this love.

[14:48] We're to know it experimentally, experientially, in our lives. Intimately, we're to trust and rely on Him.

He's the company that we are to keep. When Thomas was in Edinburgh with the family, one of the things Thomas was given to do as part of the congregational life was to develop our discipleship, working with believers in the congregation and the spiritual disciplines, encouraging them to read the Bible and pray and be in company.

And one of the great things that came out of that was the picture from Jeremiah 17 of the tree in a desert place.

It didn't matter whether it was drought or whether it was rain. As long as that tree was beside the river, its roots were going out into the water. You know, it's that great picture.

If you can read it, go back in Jeremiah 17 and see. Even in times of drought, it bears fruit. It's that picture of the roots constantly being fed on the living water, you know, the person of God, Jesus Christ.

[16:01] And that is that, you know, when drought comes, I see the only place we'll be able to bear spiritual fruit. When struggles come, and circumstances are difficult, it'll stop us from bringing out what's in our heart, maybe grumbling and complaining and shaking our fist at God.

And say, what are you doing this for? And rather, there'll be this relationship with Him that transforms the bitterness of our hearts and allows us to trust in Him and bear fruit even for bear fruit when things are difficult.

And that's an amazing reality. So time is going short. How does it play out in our lives?

Very quickly, I want to say something there, because John is always applying it. He's not just telling us these things, and that's who God is.

Yeah, take it or leave it. He says, believers, this is the nature, this is the character of God who we confess as we're Christians to believe in.

[17:09] And if you're not a Christian who we invite you to put your heart and trust and believe in as the one who alone can transform our hearts, and the reality is always then, as we saw this last night, affects, I'm not going to say as much about that tonight, it reflects how we treat one another.

Now you see it here, if you just look back at even this page, John, he addresses the church, he says, now my children, and now little children, and now beloved, and now beloved, and now children.

And he constantly uses that illustration of being God's family together, and those beloved, those who are loved by God, and that is what we're to grasp as we understand that for ourselves.

We share a debt of love to one another. Verse 11, he says, beloved, if God so loved us, so we ought to also love one another.

This is a short epistle, it's a short letter. This is verse 11, and 11 times in the short epistle, he says that.

[18:19] That's the repetition. That's what he keeps repeating. He says, beloved, love one another because of the debt we owe to Christ, and recognizing that these are brothers and sisters together, with that obligation.

It's an obligation to love one another. Hebrews 10, 24, 25 speaks about it, that we're to spur one another on to good works, and we're to do that because love, it's that whole thing, isn't it?

We think of love as, well, maybe you don't. I think sometimes we do, we think of love as a kind of rather, rather a soft thing. But this love that's been spoken of here is real backbone.

It's courageous, and it's strong, and it's honest, and it's committed. I don't know if you can see these things today, it's a manly thing.

And for the women, it's a womanly thing. It's for both of us, it's for both, it's a really significant, strong thing. And we do a deep disservice when we say it's a weak thing, or it's something for the soft-minded or soft heart.

[19:31] It's not like that, it's what John keeps repeating here because it's so significant. We should be brave enough and courageous enough to be honest with one another in love and grace and sensitivity, covering over multitudes of sins as we saw last night.

But also, our task together is to build one another up in the faith. That's what we're to do. What do we do naturally?

All the time what we do naturally is we knock each other down because that raises us up, makes us go higher when we knock other people down. That's always the way of sinful hearts, isn't it? That's our default position. Find fault with others. Find fault with fellow Christians. I'm better at them than, I'm better at this than they are. I'm closer to God than this way.

I'm critical of what they do. It's our default position. So it's a really strong work of the Spirit to transform our hearts so that what comes out of them is the grace of God and that we encourage one another and we discourage cliques and division and hierarchies and pride and self-righteous and all these things that just well up naturally within us.

[20 : 46] And when we do that, when we recognize that, we're recognizing it's impossible. What John and Tom have recognized is that's something, I can't fix that.

I can't do that. I can't just change my attitude and change my behavior and work harder than being a better person. I can't do that. I'm dead to that. I need Christ and I need His transforming power. And why is it so important this loving one another in response to the character of Christ? It's because when we do so, we see God in the community.

That's what we see. In verse 12, he says, No one has seen God, but if we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us.

That is a huge statement. He said, God is Spirit. We can't see Him. We'd love to see Him. We see Him in Jesus, of course, not physically, but our biggest struggle sometimes is, well, who is God?

[21 : 52] Where is God? I guarantee you, we'll not see Him in a divided Christian community. You'll be absent. And that's why we'll struggle. That's why Christians walk away from churches because what they see is ugliness and what they see is division.

And they don't see God at all because there's no evidence of God. But the evidence of God is when we abide in God and love one another as He says here, that's why for Him it's so important against the false teaching that He's hearing.

If there's a draft of sin and disinterest and loneliness and carelessness and prayerlessness, that's probably the biggest thing as well, isn't it, praying for and with one another, in God's absence and on the other side, when God is in the midst of us as a people, that's the window into Him that people see.

People in the community see it. They do. They're watching. And they're seeing what you've done with the building. They're seeing how you gather together. They're seeing that you'll spend lunch together. They're seeing things that are attractive and are real and meaningful.

They'll see how you respond and how you pray and how you care for one another. That's the great challenge that we have and it's tough. It's easy to trust in God because He's perfect.

[23 : 11] And it's easy to trust in Jesus because He's beautiful and manly and strong and courageous and a leader. It's not as easy to love one another, is it?

Sometimes we even struggle to love ourselves. So and lastly, very briefly. It plays out in our lives by this great love. And lastly, it gives us confidence in the day of judgment.

And that's really important, isn't it? In verse 17, He speaks about that. He says, by this love, by this is love perfected with us so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment because as He is, is so also are we in this world.

So we're like Christ in this world. And that gives us confidence in the day of judgment. Now in a moment, we'll be celebrating the Lord's Supper. And that celebration says that we remember the Lord's death.

But we point forward and it says, until He comes, He's coming back. He's coming back to gather His people and to bring judgment to the world at that level or to declare judgment.

[24 : 16] Sin has already been judged in Christ and across. But John is certain of this future perspective. He's certain that this day is coming. It's part of His message.

It's part of what He's saying. It's the truth that's handed down. It's the legacy of a crucified, risen, ascended and returning Savior. It's all part of the truth.

It's all part of that message. And it's all part of Jesus' legacy. And we have to hold on to that. If you're just living for today as if this world is everything, as if just making the most of this world is what we're living for, then we've lost the perspective of something much, much greater that we are passing quicker than a weaver's shuttle.

Our lives are going and soon we will be no more. But there is an eternity and there is a judgment to come. God's judgment will be coming.

And the cross is for us the place where God has judged our sins already. And so we have no fear. Fear is gone. That is the remarkable truth about basking in the love of Christ, His gift to us.

[25 : 26] Nothing we've earned, nothing we deserve, nothing that we deserve, but His gift to us so that fear has gone. Verse 18, judgment come by this perfect love.

And then He goes on immediately saying, verse 18, there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear for fear as to do with judgment. And whoever fears has not been perfected in love. That's why He speaks this way. That's why He's repetitive, because it's everything. There isn't anything else. There's no plan B. No one will be able to stand on that day. Will you be able to stand on that day and list off the things that make you free to get to heaven?

Of course not. None of us could. None of us could. But we can hide behind what Jesus, His atoning sacrifice, spoken of in verse 10, because the Father's wrath is appeased in the Son's sacrifice. That's the only response against evil that is victorious. And we remember His great cry on the cross.

[26 : 32] Remember His great cry? Interestingly, the same word is repeated four times in this section, in one form or another.

We see, Tintalestae, He said on the cross, it's finished. That great work that had worked from before the creation of the world, that He planned from before the creation of the world, and your names are on there.

You trust in Jesus Christ, my name is there. It was finished. It was perfected. And then in verse 12 here, He says, if we know the love of God, His love is perfected than this, it's finished, it's complete. On verse 17, He says as well, by this love, this love is perfected than this, it's complete. On verse 18, He says, perfect love casts out fear, and love is being perfected in love.

It's the same word that He's using. He's reminding us that the work is finished, the debt is being paid. You sit at the Lord's table today and enjoy it, and remember that the debt is being paid.

[27 : 40] The guilt has been assuaged, it's been taken, it's been punished. God said at that time it's finished, and that means that fear is gone. Nobody wants to die.

And nobody likes the process of dying. Remember my dad said that shortly before he died, he said, I'm not afraid of death, I'm not afraid of what lies ahead.

But he said, I don't like the process, going through that, the physical reality, no one looks forward to that. There's no fear in that.

There's no fear in what lies ahead because it's finished, Christ has done it for us. And surely, surely when he was talking, and John was talking about the completed love of Christ, he was thinking of the word Jesus cried out on the cross, it was finished.

Final word, no other revelation, no other message, it's done. Doesn't matter, 21st St, doesn't matter, people in the 29th century are coming to church, there'll be no different message because it's once for all, and that makes it so significant.

[28 : 41] And our response should be of God as for us who can be against us. And you're called today, we're all called today to respond to that message.

The false teachers who read this must have felt stripped naked by this message, exposed, made to feel like dunces, idiots, because they had nothing, they had nothing compared with this message, sublime truth, this, and nothing compares with what we have.

And we're called to remember it in the sacrament. And he's given us the sacrament to help us physically, there's something tangible about eating and drinking that reminds us of what we have and who we have, and may it be a time when we renew our vows, and when you think about maybe if you're not a Christian, you're challenged or you're not sure if you're a Christian or not, think about what he has done and this message, don't shoot the messenger, check the message, it's truth, unchanging through time, it still remains for every person, for the sins of the whole world if we'll put our faith in him.

Let's pray.