

Those of us that attend church have heard time and again the teaching of John’s first letter. We have heard that God loves us and that we are to love one another numerous times. But if someone outside the faith heard the phrase: “*Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to...*” what would they say comes next? The average person who hears “*Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to...*” would probably finish the sentence with: “*love God.*”

But John doesn’t say that. He says, “*Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another*” (v. 11). John lived with the earthly Jesus for three years and worked with him for three years. But John writes today’s message after many years of living with the risen Lord and the Holy Spirit sent by the Father. He has served the risen Jesus for decades and meditated upon what the risen Jesus taught him and now teaches us.

John not only claims that we should love one another, but that “*God is love.*” “*God is love*” (from verses 8 and 16) is the most compressed statement in the Bible about God. It’s like a bale of straw, jammed with stems of wheat that contain all sorts of meaning. Sometimes the Bible describes God as angry or jealous or wrathful. But the Bible never says “*God is anger; God is jealousy; God is wrath.*” The Bible doesn’t even say “*God is forgiveness*” although we know that God is forgiving. But the Bible does state in a concise three word proclamation that “*God is love.*” All of God’s actions express God’s love. If God creates, it’s in love. If God governs, it’s in love. If God judges, it’s in love. Love is God’s nature, the why and the way God does things.

It’s also important to note about this statement from 1 John 4, “*God is love,*” that the grammatical order of the words is not reversible in either Greek or English. It cannot mean “Love is God.” If you take some time in English with two nouns separated by the verb “is,” in the order of “___ is ___,” you find that the “smaller” half of the equation does not fit into the “larger” concept of the statement. For example, stating “a chair is furniture” cannot be reversed to say “furniture is a chair.” Furniture is more than a chair. And of course God is more than love. The grammarian Daniel Wallace says it like this: “God has the quality of love, but is not identical with it. If this were a convertible proposition it would affirm a kind of pantheism” (*Greek Grammar Beyond The Basics*, p. 45).

At the very beginning of the passage we read in verse 7: “*Dear friends (Beloved in the Greek), let us love one another, for love comes from God.*” New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce notes that “Too often Christians fawn over the Greek word that John uses—*agape*, translated as Christian love. Truth is, the deeper meaning is not in this single word. Words transport different meanings says Bruce: It is not a question of the intrinsic sense of the words used, for in the LXX the noun *agape* and is used of Amnon’s misplaced passion for his half-sister Tamar in 2 Samuel. That is a story of sexual assault, so the word cannot carry the same meaning as here in 1 John. The love which the New Testament enjoins us to show involves a consuming passion for the well-being of others, and this love has its wellspring in God” (*The Epistles Of John*, p. 107).

Whether we’re reading the Old or New Testament, the Bible proclaims what God is like before it instructs us how God wants us to live. John does the same thing. The logic goes like this: If this is how God has so loved us, then John concludes we should love one another. To be faithful to the scriptures we should

follow the same order when we are thinking about God: first what God is like, then how God leads us to live. Humans don't need a long list of rules to live by. We need to know first that God loves us.

Because God loves us, God wants us to get along with each other. I can't just take my own little faith and run away from everyone else to privately enjoy God's blessings. Jayne told me the other day that she was listening to Charles Stanley give a sermon. Well first I had to get over the fact that my wife was two-timing me for a TV preacher. Then I remembered that Charles Stanley is in his 80s and he lives in Atlanta, Georgia. I think I'm safe. Anyway, he was talking about the church and Jesus' statement to Peter after Peter declares "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*" Jesus responds to him saying, "*I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.*" Charles Stanley's point was this: If you say you don't need the church, then you're saying that Jesus had it all wrong, that building the church was a mistake from the beginning. John knows better. He knows that in the church we have to try to love one another—especially our brothers and sisters in the faith.

In verse 12 John nails down the idea of how we should live: "*No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is made complete in us.*" The Christian life works like this: No one has ever seen God, and only a few people saw the earthly Jesus, but plenty of people see *us*. We who believe in Jesus are seen every day in hundreds of places throughout the world. God's love is made real in the lives we live. Our lives are proof that "*God is love.*"

Love is the way God became human, and love is the way we humans become more like God. That sounds like "up in the sky" talk, so how can the phrase "*God is love*" come closer to where we live? How can it come down to earth? A thousand years ago a Christian writer named Aelred was born who became Abbot of the Rievaulx Abby in northern England. He once said this: "God is... friendship." He did not say "*God is love,*" as John says in the epistle, because that can seem distant, maybe too cerebral. But "God is friendship." That gets down to earth with Jesus, where you show your love by doing those things that you would do for a friend.

Have you met a new friend recently? If you treat that person like a true friend, you'll share your time with them. You'll ask them what they have done and what they think and feel. You'll go to lunch with them and maybe take a walk along the river. You'll find out about their family and where they're from. That's how you would treat a friend. When we hear "*God is love*" it can bounce off our cranium and never penetrate our body, but true friendship has to do with flesh and blood.

It means you hug a person who hasn't yet told you she was wrong when she got mad at you. You phone the fellow who last time you saw him went away with hurt feelings. You take the first step when the other person is pouting. You give up your right to say "I told you so." You put the other person first—just as God did for us in Christ. Easy? Heavens no. Sometimes it feels like bleeding, which Jesus literally did for us. "God is friendship" might make someone think that God isn't all that important, since friendship today seems so optional and so ordinary, but friendship is laying aside our interests and our time for another person.

Years before John wrote this morning's scripture, he heard Jesus say: "*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends*" (John 15:13). When we say "*God is love*" we understand that

love is performing Jesus' difficult work. But it's also the act of human friendship. So we can see why John tells us: "*Let us love one another, because love comes from God.*"

At this point in First John, we should be getting the idea that John's thoughts seem jumbled together and often repeated. It's true. To get a better grasp on the passage we are looking at today, let me share a short list of ideas and themes that John mentions in these verses.

- Loving one another is a way to partake of God's nature (vv. 7-8, 16)
- We are commanded to love one another (vv. 7, 11, 21)
- Love has its source in God (v. 7)
- Those who hate or do not love do not know God (vv. 8, 20)
- We have seen God's love and learn about love in Jesus (vv. 9, 14)
- God lives in us and we live in God (vv. 12-13, 15)
- We understand love by what God has done for us (vv. 9-10, 16)
- God's love is completed when we love others (vv. 12, 17)
- God's love within us makes us confident to face God in the judgment (v. 17)
- Love does not include fear but destroys fear and punishment (v. 18)
- We love because God first loved us (v. 19)

There you have a list of ideas from John's somewhat rambling epistle. It can be challenging to sum up this passage with a cogent message. But I'm going to try anyway. However, you will have to participate in this sermon summary. You're probably thinking "Gee, I would have been listening more carefully had I known there was going to be a *quiz* at the end!"

Stick with me. The main theme of 1 John 4:7-21 is simply too big to miss. One four letter word will do the job. And that word is? ____? L-O-V-E. Yes!

Next, making good use of the sermon title I gave to this message, we can deduce from this passage the *source* of that LOVE. So if you're still with me, the *source* of ALL LOVE is (three letter word) ____? Well done. It's GOD.

And finally, the *commandment* we are given here in John's first epistle should be crystal clear now that we know the *main theme* of LOVE and the *source* of LOVE which is GOD. The commandment is summarized in three words, even as John echoes the words that he first heard Jesus speak to him and the other disciples on the night before his death. Are we ready? In three words, the *commandment* is: LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

The theme is LOVE. The source is GOD. The commandment is LOVE ONE ANOTHER. (You WERE paying attention!)

And the job is ours. Amen.