

INTRODUCTION

I'd like to begin by having you fill in the blank. God is . . . Fill in the blank. That's right. The answer is "love." The Bible is saturated with God's love isn't it, from its beginning, Genesis 1:1, to its end, Revelation 22:21. But nowhere does it better express it than in 1 John 4:16-21. Turn there and let's learn what it teaches us about that.

WHAT "GOD IS LOVE" DOESN'T MEAN

I begin with verses 8 and 16 and the words *"God is love."* I once counseled a non-Christian who didn't even know that the Bible contains verses and chapters. But when I asked her what she knew about God, she quickly replied that He is love. It's a fascinating thing. Even the most Biblically illiterate non-Christians seem to know that. That God is love is probably the most widely known truth about Him.

But it's also the most misunderstood. Every non-Christian that I've ever talked to about it has misinterpreted it. They've taken the word *"love"* in the statement to be a predicate nominative. Going back to our grade school grammar, that means that God = love. Love is His essential nature and governs every other quality of His.

Almost all non-Christians believe that and that's where their confidence lies. Since God's love governs every other quality of His, including holiness, He won't harm them whether they follow Him or not. A non-Christian attorney friend of mine name Dan believes just that. He told me one day, at the courthouse of all places, that he doesn't fear God's judgment and explained why. *"I'm a good person and God is love,"* he said. When he said *"God is love,"* he meant that God = love.

But that isn't true. God doesn't = love. Think about it. If God = love, then love = God. And if it does, we should worship it, which is exactly what secularists and our culture do. Love is ultimate to them and they're in love with love. But that's heresy isn't it? Love doesn't = God. As we all know, God has no equals or opposites.

The word "love" in the sentence isn't a predicate nominative. It's a predicate adjective. It doesn't equate God with love. It simply identifies love as a quality of His. Love isn't Him. It's only one thing that's true about Him. He never suspends His other qualities to exercise His love. He always acts like Himself instead, meaning that all of His qualities work equally, perfectly, and harmoniously together.

That makes the confidence of non-Christians misplaced, which is what I told Dan. God is holy as much as He is love. He acts toward you not only in His love but in His holiness as well. He will harm you in His holiness and love if you don't follow Him.

THE SOURCE OF GOD'S LOVE

So, God isn't just love but He is love. It's an astonishing quality and we need to understand two things about it – its source and nature.

Notice that John doesn't say that God is loving or that He loves. He says that He is love. That way of stating it reveals what its source is. It's His own nature. There isn't anything about the ones that He loves that causes Him to love them. His love doesn't proceed from some quality in them – intelligence, goodness, beauty, talent, influence, wealth, and so on. It proceeds from some quality in Him, His love. He loves them because He is love. That implies three remarkable things.

First, God loves everyone. He never considers whether or not a person is worthy of being loved. Worth has nothing to do with it. He can't resist His own impulse to love and thus does so indiscriminately.

Second, God loves everyone equally. He has not, does not, and never will love one person even slightly more than another. He loves every one as much as it's possible for a person to be loved.

And third, God loves everyone unflinchingly. He can never stop loving anyone no matter what they do. He can never stop loving them no matter how unlovely or unlovable they become.

O.J. Simpson is in the news again, arrested for armed robbery. People describe him in many ways, including psychopathic. I don't know

about that but I do know this. First, God loves him. Second, He loves Him as much as He has loved or ever will love anyone including “the disciple that Jesus loved,” John himself. And third, He loves him as much now, after committing the murders and the robbery, as He did before.

But it isn't just O.J., it's you as well. He loves each of you equally and unfailingly because the source of His love is His own nature. There's something about Him not you that makes Him love you.

THE NATURE OF GOD'S LOVE

We need to understand a second thing about God's love, its nature. It has two dimensions in that regard. The first is goodwill.

Look at verse 18 and the word “punishment.” John is talking about a relationship with someone who wills and seeks what is bad for us when conditions are right. Now look at the word “fear.” That word reveals the emotional ambience of such a relationship. It makes us anxious and afraid. A woman once described her relationship with an ambitious co-worker of hers this way, *“I walk on pins and needles when I'm around her.”* That's what John is talking about here.

But notice what perfect love does. It casts our fear. Imagine being in a relationship with someone who never wills or seeks what is bad for us. He or she always wills and seeks what is good for us. That's goodwill and verse 18 implies the emotional ambience it creates. It makes us confident and calm.

Well, that's exactly what we get in our relationship with God – utter and absolute goodwill. He *never* wills or seeks what is bad for us. On the contrary, He *always* wills or seeks what is best for us, no matter what the cost is to Him. That in turn makes us confident and calm.

God's love has a second dimension – emotional identification, also called affection. Parental love illustrates that. Listen to two quotes in that regard. First, Barb Johnson says, *“A child is a parent's heart walking around outside of him or her.”* Second, James Dobson says, *“A parent is only as happy as his or her unhappiest child.”* Those

quotes teach us that good parents emotionally identify with their children. Their hearts are inseparably bound to them. Consequently, they rejoice when their children rejoice and weep when they weep.

It's the very same way with God and us. We desperately need to grasp this. He loves us and emotionally identifies with us because He does. A.W. Tozer expresses this far better than I can. He writes: *"We have made the point that God's end in all things is His own glory – that He should be manifested, known, admired, and adored. This statement is true, but it is incomplete. It needs to be balanced by a recognition that through setting His love on human beings, God has voluntarily bound up his own final happiness with theirs."* He's right. God has voluntarily bound up His happiness with ours! What we are and do and what happens to us warm or hurt the heart of God! He emotionally identifies with us!

Maybe you heard about Britney Spear's disaster of a performance at some kind of MTV celebration. The talking heads on television had a field day with that. They gossiped about it for days and reveled in her humiliation. But not God. That's what I thought when I read about it. He's so unlike them. His heart hurts for her and He weeps with her.

SEE OURSELVES AS THE BELOVED OF GOD

We now know what *"God is love"* means. His nature compels Him to always will and seek our good and emotionally identify with us. That is a remarkable reality and we need to do two things in response to it.

First, we need to see ourselves as the beloved of God.

People at a sales conference were given an assignment – list the things that they are on a piece of paper, putting the most significant of those first. The first things that they wrote down included the following: failure, liar, intelligent, beautiful, coward, fast talker, and more.

Let me ask you a question in that regard. What are you? The truth is that you are many things. What would those things be if you listed them on a piece of paper? And what would you put first? What is the

single most significant fact about you?

I know what that is because it's the same for us all. God loves you. That's the single most significant fact about you – and me. We and everyone else on earth are the beloved of God.

And we need to see ourselves in light of that. Look at verse 16. John tells us here that we need to know and believe the love that God has for us and abide in it. We need to envision ourselves, in other words, as the beloved of God! We need to take our identity from that.

Thomas Merton was one of the most sought after spiritual guides of his time. But he didn't take his identity from that fact. He once told a fellow monk about that: *"If I make anything out of the fact that I am Thomas Merton, I am dead. And if you make anything out of the fact that you are in charge of the pig barn, you are dead."*

He was right. Making our selves out to be anything other than the beloved of God diminishes our person and life. Seeing ourselves clearly and confidently as the beloved of God is absolutely essential to love, peace, and joy.

If you don't see yourself that way, learn in detail what the Bible says about God's love for you, asking the Holy Spirit to give you the gift of faith or belief as you do. Then purposely and constantly place your mind on what you've learned. You'll see yourself for what you primarily are, the beloved of God, if you do.

SEE OTHERS AS THE BELOVED OF GOD

We need to respond to the fact that God is love in a second way. We need to see others as the beloved of God. Because He loves us, we should love others, John says in verses 19-21. Doing that requires several things including seeing them for what they primarily are.

As I've said before, love isn't blind. On the contrary, it always has a vision of the beloved. That's why I've challenged you so vigorously to build a vision of God. It's because building a vision of Him is essential to loving Him.

It's the same way with people. Think about all of those that we live, work, and play with every week. Whoever they are, we need to know and constantly keep in mind two things. First, all of us have a vision of them. And second, we respond to them based on that vision. We treat people as we see them in other words. That is one of the fundamental truths of our existence. We treat people as we see them.

So, see them as they are – the beloved of God. Whatever else they are, they are primarily that. They are the beloved of God and seeing them that way will cause us to treat them that way.

Several weeks ago, our church helped someone pay an electric bill. But the electric company made a mistake and applied the check to our account instead of the person's we were helping. So, I ended up talking with four different people at Ohio Edison to straighten it out, one of whom treated me like a buffoon and had no patience with me at all.

Now, that woman is several things. She is caustic, cutting, and vain and one who has wronged me. But that isn't all or even primarily what she is. She isn't primarily a wrongdoer. She is primarily the beloved of the infinite God of the universe. So I have two options in my interaction with her. On the one hand, I can see her as wrongdoer. I will retaliate and harm her if I do. On the other hand, I can see her as the beloved of God. I will love her and be kind to her if I do. I wouldn't dare do any less to someone that the infinite God loves so much.

CONCLUSION

That then is John's message. God is love and we should respond to that love by seeing others and us as we really are – the beloved of God.

And that is the most significant fact of our existence. You and I are the beloved of God. Someone at a conference once asked the brilliant theologian Karl Barth what the most profound doctrine of the Bible is. Everyone thought he would give some deep and esoteric answer but he didn't. He simply replied with these words and I leave you with them, *"Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."*