

## **INTRODUCTION**

I once heard a man talk about his home being a heaven on earth. I love that phrase because of what it connotes – a place that is relationally like heaven is. That's what all of us want all the places of our life to be isn't it, including home? We want them to be a heaven on earth.

The good news is that they can be and John tells us how in the passage I read, 1 John 4:16-21. John reveals here what it is that makes any place a heaven on earth. It's love that casts our fear and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

## **LOVE**

The theme of this passage is love. John uses that word 12 times in fact in the six verses that make it up. Let's start by defining what love means. The Bible teaches that it means two things.

First, it means to will and seek the good of the others, for their sake. Love is volitional. We want their well-being and joy to be promoted. It is also behavioral. We act, sacrificially if necessary, to promote it. We do that "for their sake." True love is emptied of self-interest. We don't will and seek their good primarily or even secondarily to benefit us. We will and seek it solely to benefit them.

A Christian wife's husband left her for a younger woman and married her. Six months after he did, an automobile accident paralyzed him. His wife then left him and filed for divorce. Shortly thereafter, his Christian ex-wife took him in and cared for him for two years until he died.

You can see the impulse of love in what that Christian ex-wife did. It wills and seek the good of others - for their sake, not its own.

Love means a second thing. It means to identify emotionally with others. When we love others, our heart is bound up with them. The condition of their person and life touch us in the very core of our being. As Paul said it, we rejoice when they rejoice and weep when they weep.

Good parents can certainly relate to that. Listen to something that

Elizabeth Stone wrote: *"Making the decision to have a child is momentous – it is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body."* That is so true, if we're good parents at least? Our children are our hearts walking around outside of us.

In answer to our prayers, my son Moses got a great job four years ago. I've told him several times since that *"I'm happier for you than you are,"* and it's true. I am! That's emotional identification and it's something that we experience in one degree or another with all those whom we love.

So that's what love means. It means that we will and seek the good of others for their own sake and that we identify emotionally with them.

## **THE OOPPOSITE AND ABSENCE OF LOVE**

Now that we know what love is, it's instructive for us to examine its opposite and absence.

The opposite of love is malice. Malice means that we will and seek the harm of others. We want them to suffer and act so that they will. We do things in order to injure them. There are many such things including anger, gossip, slander, theft, the silent treatment, the cold shoulder, sabotage, snide remarks, and so on.

After a baseball game one time, I heard a father tell his son that he was worthless. He did that because his son's performance disappointed him and he wanted him to suffer for it. What he did was the opposite of love. It was malice pure and simple.

Now that we know what the opposite of love is, let's identify its absence. The absence of love is indifference. In malice, I want to harm you. In indifference, I don't care if you are harmed or not. I pursue my desires, concerns, and rights and if you are harmed in the process then so be it. It's isn't that I'm trying to harm you. It's just that I don't value you enough to care that you are.

Indifference is always destructive especially in the home. A pastor tells about counseling a married couple. The wife blurted out, *"I*

*can't remember the last time he said, 'I love you.'*" To which the husband replied, *"When I married you 28 years ago, I told you that I loved you, and I said if I ever changed my mind I'd let you know."*

It's clear that this man was indifferent to his wife. He didn't try to harm her in his pursuit of power. He just didn't care if she was harmed or not.

So that's the opposite and the absence of love. Its opposite is malice and its absence is indifference.

## **LOVE CASTS OUT FEAR**

That brings us to verse 18. In this verse, John teaches us what the consequences of love and its opposite and absence are.

First, he teaches us what the consequence of malice and indifference is. It is fear. The word "punishment" in verse 18 shows us what fear is. It's the anticipation of harm. We fear brown recluse spiders because they can and may injure us. In the same way, we fear malicious or indifferent people because they can and may do the same.

Consider the people that you know and meet. The simple fact is that you have one degree or another of fear and anxiety in the vast majority of them. You anticipate that if the conditions are right, those people will harm you. Hopefully that doesn't include those in your home and church but the truth that is that it probably does.

I once talked with an attorney who was quite anxious about finishing a brief and getting home on time. He told me that his wife would give him the cold shoulder the rest of the evening if he didn't. There is a high degree of fear and thus anxiety in that attorney's relationship with his wife. He knows that she can and expects that she will harm him when the conditions are right. Malice and indifference create fear.

But love casts it out.

Think for a moment about some significant relationship in your life. Maybe its with a spouse, parent, fellow Christian, boss, co-worker, neighbor, or so one. Now imagine that the person you're thinking about would never do anything to harm you or make you suffer. On the

contrary, imagine that he or she truly loves you – as I defined it today. He or she always wills and seeks your good for your own sake and identifies emotionally with you. Question. What would the tone, the emotional ambience, of your relationship with that person be?

The answer is clear. The tone would be peace and confidence. We would be inwardly and outwardly at ease in our relationship with them. Wow, what a wonderful thing that would be!

I know because I had it – with my mother. I can never once remember her being malicious or indifferent with me. I don't remember her ever yelling at me or degrading me in front of others or telling me to shut up. She always pursued my best interests instead. I didn't have any fear and anxiety in my relationship with her. I was utterly at ease with her. Why? John tells us in verse 18. Love casts our fear.

That makes me wonder. What would our homes, churches, work places, stores, streets, highways, and more be if the love that casts out fear prevailed? I'll tell you. They'd be a heaven on earth.

## **THE FOUR MOVEMENTS OF LOVE**

Well, that's what God wants and it starts with us. We must love in a way that casts our fear. And the good news is that we can. John himself teaches us how in this passage and another, John 13:34-35.

These two passages reveal what Dallas Willard calls "the four movements of love." The first movement is that God loves us. We see that in 1 John 4:16 and the celebrated words "*God is love.*" We also see in it verse 19 and the words "*He first loved us.*" The second movement is that we love God. We see that in verses 20 and 21 and the words "*love God.*" The third movement is that we love people. We see that in verses 20 and 21 and the words "*love his brother.*" And finally, the fourth movement is that others love us. We see that in John 13:34-35 and the words "*love one another.*"

Those are the four movements of love and here is what I want you to see. They're causally and sequentially connected. That is critical.

Look at verses 19 and 20. The word "first" shows that God's love for us is in fact the first movement. It not only initiates and makes possible our love; it actually compels it. We cannot love God and others without first of all experiencing His love for us. If we do experience His love for us, then we will naturally, inevitably, love Him and others.

Verse 20 reveals what that implies. If we say that we love God but don't love some person, we're liars. A professing Christian once told me that he loves God. But it became apparent in that same conversation that he didn't love a co-worker of his. He despised him in fact. He's a liar because if he loves God, he will then automatically love his co-worker.

You can see in these verses that the four movements of love are causally and sequentially connected. Each one flows naturally and inevitably from the one before it. God loves us, which leads us to love Him, which leads us to love others, which leads others to love us.

Do you want to love God and others including your enemies? If so, you absolutely positively must first of all experience God's love for you. That's because if you do, you will naturally and inevitably love Him and thus them. There are no shortcuts around or exceptions to this.

## **HOW TO EXPERIENCE THE FIRST MOVEMENT**

So, let's commit ourselves to experiencing God's love for us. Doing that, according to verse 16, requires two things.

First, we must know and believe in the love that God has for us. We do that by studying and learning everything that the Bible teaches about God's love for each of us. Study aids can assist us in doing that. Take *Nave's Topical Bible*, for instance, and look under the category "God: Love of." Or take *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* and look under the word "love." I can give you some sample passages to start with: Isaiah 49:15; John 3:16; 15:9; Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:4-7; Ephesians 1:5-6; 3:17-19; 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17; 1 John 3:1; and Revelation 1:5-6.

Verse 16 reveals a second thing that experiencing God's love for us requires. We must abide in His love. To abide in His love means that we

engage it with our whole being. We bring it before us and focus on and linger over it both in times of solitude and silence and as we move through our daily routines. Here are examples of what I mean.

Last week, I got alone with God and spent time reflecting on what Jesus teaches in John 15:9 - that He loves me like Father God loves Him. I spent time thinking about the depth and nature of the love that the Father has for the Son. I then moved on to thinking about the fact that the Son loves me just like that and what that means to me.

Or several weeks ago, I saw a mother in a grocery store with her small baby and all the bottles, diapers, and so on that go along with it. Seeing her triggered Isaiah 49:15 in my mind. That verse is one of the strongest expressions of God's love in the entire Bible. It says that He loves you and me far more than a mother does her nursing child. So as I waited in line, I looked at that mother and thought this. God loves me far more than she loves her baby.

You get the idea. Experiencing God's love requires that we pursue knowing, believing, and abiding in the love of God with intensity. If we do that in the context of an overall life of discipleship to Jesus, we will then inevitably love Him and others as well.

## **CONCLUSION**

What I've just preached has dramatically impacted me. It led me some time ago to promise God something and it's this: *"Living God, I promise you that I will do whatever is necessary to love everyone I know and meet in a way that casts out fear, beginning at home."*

Let me ask you. Are you willing to make that same promise? Are you willing to do whatever is necessary to love others in a way that casts out fear – beginning at home? Are you willing to pursue knowing, believing, and abiding in the love of God for you with intensity? If you are, make promise God just that as we sing our final song. That is the very first step in making every place of your life what God wants it to be - a heaven on earth.