

Last time we talked about what love is.

God is love –

therefore we know what love is by looking at God.

And in this the love of God is made manifest:

by the incarnation – where the Son of God humbled himself
and took on our flesh;

and by the atonement – where the Son of God humbled himself
even to the point of death on the cross.

If love is defined by the incarnation and the atonement

then it should be clear that no mere mortal is capable of anything more
than a pathetic facsimile of love.

And yet John refuses to come this conclusion!

Indeed, John says that “God abides in us and his love is perfected in us!”

1. The Reality of Love: God Abides in the One... (v15-16)

a. ...Who Confesses Jesus Is the Son of God (v15)

¹⁵ *Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.*

We have seen throughout John’s epistle

the interweaving of the doctrinal, the ethical, and the relational –
faith, obedience, and love,
what you know, what you do, what you love.

In verses 15-16 John returns to the doctrinal:

whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him and he in God.

Here, your relationship with God hinges on proper confession.

(in verse 8 we were told that the one who does not love, does not know God –
there, your relationship with God hinged on your obedience/love)

Over and over again we see that you cannot reduce the Christian life
to any one (or two) of these three.

What you confess, what you do, and what you love
all go together.

Last time I told you that we must take seriously John’s words:

“whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” (v7).

Tonight I tell you that we must take seriously

“whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him”

Now, it is not just a matter of words.

Mormons, Moonies and Marcionites would all confess
that Jesus is the Son of God.
Indeed, the very antichrists that John has condemned
would doubtless have affirmed the words that John states!

But the point is not that someone parrots these words.
You could train a parrot to say “Jesus is the Son of God” –
but that would not mean that the parrot had confessed Christ!

Confessing that Jesus is the Son of God means that you confess what John has said:
*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God...
and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... (John 1).*

This is the great stumbling block for Jews, Muslims, and all Unitarians:
the idea that the eternal God has a Son.

Their error is that they conceive of God as utterly detached from his creation.
They comprehend God’s majesty and greatness,
but they cannot accept the implication of the statement “God is love.”
Oh, maybe they affirm it in principle!
They may affirm that God is love in creating everything.
They may believe that God is love in being kind and gracious.
They may believe that God is love in all sorts of abstract ways!

The Arians fell into this trap.
They could not imagine that such a high and holy God
could enter into the filth and muck of our sinful world;
and so in order to preserve the majesty and transcendence of God,
they declared that God brought forth his Son
as the first of all his works.
“there was when the Son was not.”

And they thought that by this they could preserve the holiness of the Father,
and still confess that Jesus was the Son.

But if you say that the Son is not God,
or if you say that he is only *similar* to God,
then you do not confess that Jesus is the Son of God.
If God only sent a creature (even the most exalted of creatures)
then the incarnation and atonement are not really examples of *God’s* love.
If it was not God himself who suffered for us,
then it was not God himself who loved us!

Because John says that “in this is love,
not that we have loved God, but that he loved us

and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

As Gregory of Nyssa put it,

“Do you ask the reason why God was born among men?...
Our nature was sick and needed a doctor.
Man had fallen and needed someone to raise him up.
He who had lost life needed someone to restore it.
He who had ceased to participate in the good
needed someone to bring him back to it.
He who was shut up in darkness needed the presence of light....
He who was under the yoke of slavery
was looking for someone to set him free.”
(Treatise on Religious Instruction)

And no one could free us from our yoke but God himself.

But the effect of John’s statement
is that “fellowship with God depends on the historical fact of the incarnation;
we must confess that the Father sent the Son, and that the Son is Jesus.”
(Yarbrough 253, quoting Marshall).

In other words, if we would abide in God and God in us,
we must *confess* that central act of love –
that profound manifestation of love –
that was found in the incarnation and atonement.

And verse 16 continues the doctrinal emphasis, but with a different twist:

b. ...Who Abides in Love (v16)

¹⁶*So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us.*

The verbs here are in the perfect tense.

The present tense would say “we know and believe the love God has for us.”
The past tense would say “we knew and believed the love God has for us”
But the perfect tense says “we have known and believed the love God has for us”

The perfect tense suggests that something has happened
which has an ongoing significance.

That’s why the ESV translates it “have come to know and to believe”
It is not just a piece of information that we learned.
This knowledge is also a present reality.

Because the knowledge and faith in view is not merely a piece of information!

We have come to know and to believe the *love* which God has for us.

The preposition is not the normal impersonal ‘for us’ –
but is *en hemin* – in us, or among us.

We have come to know and to believe the love which God has in us.
After all, the love we are talking about in 1 John 4
is not a feeling;
it is not a passion or affection;
the love God has in us
is nothing less than the incarnation and atonement –
it is nothing less than Jesus Christ his Son!

You see, the point of the Gospel is not that God has good feelings about you!
The point of the Gospel is that God sent his Son so that you might have life!
And that life is the light of the world, Jesus Christ himself!

That is why John says yet again at the end of verse 16:

God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

So if you confess that Jesus is the Son of God
then you abide in God, and you abide in love, and God abides in you,
because God is love!

In verses 17-21, John then turns to the implications of all this.

2. The Perfection of Love: God Abides in Us (v17)

¹⁷*By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world.*

Verse 17 clearly indicates that the love spoken of here
is the love defined in the previous verses.

“In this way is [this] love perfected with us.”

In what way?

By our confessing that Jesus is the Son of God –
and by our loving one another.

Because our faith, our love, and our obedience are all conformed to love –
or, to say it another way,
because our knowledge, our practice, and our relationships
are conformed to Jesus.

To what end?

So that we may have confidence in the day of judgment.

Judgment is coming!

Jesus will return with all his holy angels

to render judgment on the deeds done in the body, whether good or evil!
And John says that knowing and believing God's love in us
is what gives us boldness in the day of judgment.

And love has been perfected with us because in Jesus God is with us –
because we abide in him and he in us.

That is why John concludes verse 17
“because as he is so also are we in the world.”

Before we can move on to verse 18, I need to make one perfectly clear:
this perfection of love has already happened!

The ESV translation “by this *is* love perfected with us” is okay –
so long as you recognize that this is a perfect passive verb.

We've already seen the importance of the perfect tense
(past action with ongoing implications).

Love *has been* perfected with us because Jesus is God with us.
Because of the incarnation – because of the atonement –
because of what God has done in his love for us –
love has been perfected with us.

I said last week that our love is a pathetic imitation of God's love.
That's true.

But in Christ, God's love has taken up its abode in your heart!
Love has been perfected with us.
And this is the ground of our assurance and our confidence
in the day of judgment.
No – not that we loved God!
Nor that we loved others!
But that he loved us and gave himself as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

And therefore, as he is, so also are we in this world.
Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.”
The one who follows me will not walk in darkness
but will have the light of life (John 8:12)

Jesus said again, “I am the light of the world” –
and so he gave sight to the blind man. (John 9:5)

Jesus also said, “You are the light of the world.
A city set on a hill cannot be hid”! (Matthew 5:14)

As he is, so also are we in this world.
Because Jesus shines in the darkness,
therefore all who abide in him and he in them
also shine in the darkness.

3. The Triumph of Love: Perfect Love Casts Out Fear (v18)

¹⁸*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.*

Verse 18 is one of the most misunderstood texts in the Bible!
John pits fear against love.

Many struggle with this because they remember that Proverbs says
“the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.”
So some have concluded that “fear” is the beginning,
but as love is perfected, fear is cast out,
and so whereas the Christian life begins with the fear of the LORD
eventually perfect love casts out fear.

That is a plausible argument,
but it assumes that fear has only one meaning throughout scripture.

John himself carefully defines what sort of fear he is thinking of:
“fear has to do with punishment.”

When we say “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom”
we do not mean “fear of punishment is the beginning of wisdom” –
rather it means that we are more concerned with what God thinks,
than with what anyone else thinks!

A healthy fear of the LORD is entirely compatible with perfect love.

At the same time, we should not so quickly banish fear of punishment, either!
John does not say that no one should fear punishment!
Rather, what he says is that the one who fears [punishment]
has not been perfected in love.
In other words, the one who fears punishment
has not surrendered to the all-consuming love of God!

John is presenting the Christian life *as it should be* –
not as it inevitably is.
Christians often *do* fear punishment
(and for good reason, sometimes, when we live contrary to love!).

Perfect love casts out fear (of punishment)
because perfect love is nothing less than the love of God –

the love that was manifested in the incarnation and atonement,
the love that has taken away our sins and united us to the life of God.

And John says that love *has been perfected* with us –
because Christ dwells with us!

4. The Result of Love: Love for Brother (v19-21)

Therefore (verse 19):

We love because he first loved us.

While we were sinners – while we were enemies –
Christ came in the flesh and took our sins upon himself.

We love because he first loved us.

You cannot possibly convince God to love you more than he already does.
He demonstrated his love for you by sending his son to die for you.

And his love for us is not just a moral influence.
I am not saying that you *should* love because God loved you.
I am not saying that God's love should *motivate* you to do a better job of loving.

No, John's point is that *we love because he first loved us.*
This is simply what happens when the love of God abides in us.

²⁰ *If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.*

John does not worry about whether you are offended.
He has more important concerns –
namely, the truth as it is in Jesus.

If you say you love God, but you hate your brother,
then you are a liar.

Why?

Because he who does not love his brother whom he has seen
cannot love God whom he has not seen.

You may recall Charles Schultz's classic line,
"I love mankind – it's just people I can't stand!"

But God says that if you don't love *people*,
then not only do you not *really* love mankind,
but you don't love God either.

And the reason behind this is simple:

God created man in his image.
If you love God, then you will love what reminds you of God.
So when you see that which is in the image of God you will love it.

Finally, John gets around to the commandment:

²¹And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Love is not only a new reality –
it is also a command.

In other words, John will not let you get away with saying that you didn't "feel" like it.
It makes no difference whether your wife is acting mean or sweet!
It makes no difference that your friend is stabbing you in the back.

Whoever loves God must also love his brother.
Love must characterize all that you do!
And this is not burdensome!

This is just who you are in Christ!