

CHRISTMAS 2017

Week Four | December 17, 2017 | Love

PREPARATION

MONDAY THROUGH WEDNESDAY

Spend some time alone in God's Word reading through 1 John 4:7–21. Pray that God would bring to life the truths of this text and encourage others with the truth of Scripture.

THURSDAY THROUGH SATURDAY

Read through the questions included in this week's guide. Many questions have been included in this lesson for discussion. Determine which questions will work well to encourage, push, and grow your love for God and others in the best way.

DAILY

As you prepare, pray for the preaching of God's Word this coming week at the corporate church gathering. Pray also for your time together with your group; that the Spirit would make effective the teaching to bring gospel clarity, gospel change, and a heart for gospel mission to those present.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God's love is presented to us in Christ, passed on to others through our actions, perfected in us over time, and ultimately produces a confidence in our salvation.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

When we return often to the love of God shown to us in Christ, we don't have to muster up love for others or force our way into becoming more like Jesus—both happen naturally. We are also given the ability to walk in confidence of our salvation instead of in fear.

MEDITATE

"In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 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" (1 John 4:9–10).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

Q: *How does our culture define love? What do you think of this definition? Why do you think this definition exists?*

Q: *How would you evaluate how well you are loving the fellow believers in your life? What measuring stick or standard would you use?*

Few thinkers tackle the idea of God's love and our duty to love others better than C.S. Lewis. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, he offers some insightful and humbling truths for us all. While unbelievers often think God's love is earned by being good, Lewis says this in response:

“They hope, by being good, to please God if there is one; or—if they think there is not—at least they hope to deserve approval from good men. But the Christian thinks any good he does comes from the Christ-life inside him. He does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us.”

Lewis was getting at a central reality for the believer. God's love is what empowers us to be good, and what perfects us over time. When we try to be good, loving, forgiving, merciful, or sacrificial all on our own, we quickly find out how incapable we are! If we are honest, at some point, we've all tried to embody God's love on our own, thinking we can produce divine love through our own abilities, gifts, or strengths. All on our own, we try to muster the power we need to love our rowdy children, our frustrating roommate, our annoying coworker, our struggling spouse, our hard-nosed boss, or even God himself. And we end up exhausted every time—tapped out, burned out, and strung out, wondering why in the world God called us to love in ways we just *can't!*

Making another point in his book, Lewis says, “No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good.” All of our striving to be loving, good, and godly toward others, as Lewis says, “leads up to the vital moment at which you turn to God and say, ‘You must do this. I can't.’” For us today, “I can't” is the place we end and the place God begins when it comes to true, godly, sacrificial love. As we will see in this lesson, we were never meant to muster up love by ourselves. We were meant to experience God's love as it's presented in Christ,

and pass it on to others not through will power, but through the power God provides in His Spirit. We are right to say “we can’t” when it comes to the divine love expected from us. But *God* can, and He does it through us!

👤: *Share about a time a brother or sister in the faith loved you in a sacrificial way. How did this show you God’s love for you?*

👤: *How does it feel when a close, believing friend sees your needs but doesn’t step in to help?*

📊 UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

So far in this Christmas series, we have studied *hope, peace, and joy*. Now we move on to exploring the Biblical idea of *love* as seen in 1 John 4. Though our culture assumes love is shown predominantly by feelings, John reveals that the love of God was shown in an action, namely, the sending of His Son. He also shows us the ways God’s love should abide in our own lives and radiate to other Christians (though many of the same principles can be extended to non-Christians). For the 21st-century American, John seems to bounce around in his topics. However, teaching that cycles through various themes over and over was a very common practice in his day. His book is in the form of what commentators call the *cyclical writing style*. As we explore the cycle of themes that show up throughout these verses, we will see three primary truths about God’s love for us.

1. **GOD’S LOVE IS PRESENTED IN CHRIST**
2. **GOD’S LOVE IS PASSED ON TO OTHERS**
3. **GOD’S LOVE IS PERFECTED WITHIN US**

GOING DEEPER

+ *This next section will help show what God’s Word says about this week’s particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week’s Biblical truth.*

GOD’S LOVE IS PRESENTED IN CHRIST

📊 1 JOHN 4:9–10, 14

- Q: *On any given day, how would you finish this sentence? “It would be crystal clear that God truly loved me if He just did _____ in my life.”*
- Q: *What reasons do non-Christians often give to argue that God isn’t truly loving?*
- Q: *God made His love clear to us in a certain way, according to these verses. What is that way? What was His purpose in doing this?*

Sometimes it’s difficult to believe that the most powerful being in the universe truly loves us, especially during hard times. We think if God really loved us, He’d give us that promotion, or send money to assist in our financial hardship, or give us the spouse we’ve always longed to have, or fix a certain issue in our marriage or even our country. While God certainly cares about all the little details and hardships in our life, John tells us that immediately relieving those issues is not God’s primary way of communicating His love for us.

So what is the primary way He communicates this to us? While the love of God for His people was proclaimed by the Prophets and pronounced by the Psalmists (as we’ve seen by studying Isaiah and the Psalms in this series), His love was fully presented by sending His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the One the prophets and Psalmists were pointing to all along! He saw our biggest hardships—sin, rebellious hearts, death, and hell—and sent Jesus to remedy all of those conditions!

- Q: *Why do you think John makes sure to mention Christ as the “Son” so many times throughout these verses? Why is the sending of a son so important for us to note, as opposed to a representative or ambassador?*

Sometimes we forget the sacrifice that was required for God in sending His Son, and the jaw-dropping impact it should have on us. If you have children, bring them to the forefront of your mind. If you don’t have children, think of a special niece, nephew, student, or child. Hold his or her face and story in your mind. Now, imagine a group you consider an “enemy” of all that’s good. Perhaps racists come to mind. Or those who commit treason against their country. Or terrorists. Or those who oppress the vulnerable. Or abortion advocates. Or a certain political party. Or radical extremists who kill in the name of religion. Or rapists. Imagine sending your child into the enemy’s territory to try to help them change, help them repent, help them see the error of their ways, yet knowing in advance that,

despite a good motive and a pure message, your child will be tortured and brutally killed by them. Imagine that little face in your mind. Will you send that child into enemy territory knowing the outcome?

Given the nightmare that this type of situation would be to any parent, we can see the lengths God went to communicate His love for those who were His enemies! He sent His only Son, knowing full well what humanity, in its wretched, depraved, perverted, and bloodthirsty state, would do to Him. Yet even in a death so brutal as a crucifixion, God had a plan no one could have expected—a resurrection. In this resurrection, we who have trusted Christ—and become the very family of God instead of His enemy—get to live eternally in that resurrection power.

Imagine your child bringing one of those “enemies” you imagined into your home, advocating for them to have a cozy bedroom, a seat at your dinner table, and your last name! This is how God presents His unbelievable love—sending His Son to die at the hands of torturous enemies, resurrecting Him in power, and then giving those enemies a seat at God’s family table (Rom. 5:8–11; Col 1:21–22; 1 Jn. 3:1). John wants it to be clear. If we want to be blown away by God’s love for us, all we must do is look at Christ, His only Son sent to die for our sins!

❖: *How does it both challenge and encourage you that God loved you first and not the other way around?*

❖: *Why is God’s work through His Son a better presentation of His love for us than any earthly circumstance He could “fix” for us in the moment?*

GOD’S LOVE IS PASSED ON TO OTHERS

❖ 1 JOHN 4:7–8, 11, 19–21

❖: *This passage contains the famous line, “God is love.” How does our culture interpret this? How does John want us to interpret it?*

❖: *John says believers ought to love one another for what reason?*

As Christ brings us into the family of God through His gospel work, we look at the others added to this family in a new light, seeing them as brothers and sisters. According to John, there is no such thing as loving another believer half-heartedly or even as a distant acquaintance. In the faith community, loving other believers as a *family member* is the only option! The reason John gives for this is not because it's the "nice" thing to do, but because it's the way *God loved us*. The Lord doesn't love us partially or distantly; He loves us as His own, as His children. This deep, family-level love God pours out on us should be passed on to other believers around us.

John says engaging with other Christians at this level is external evidence that we are true believers who have been changed by God's extravagant love. If we don't love other believers as brothers and sisters, or worse, operate in *hatred or discord* toward them, we cannot call ourselves recipients of the great love of God. In other words, we can't call ourselves the children of God when we don't love like He loves! If His love is truly in us, it always passes to others. Love is always demonstrated by action. And alternately, anyone who does not demonstrate God's love through their actions "does not know God," in John's words.

Q: *What does loving our brother and sister look like if it's modeled after the way God manifests love to us in the gospel?*

Instead of defining "loving our brother or sister" as simply being pleasant, having common interests, or shaking hands at church, we have to instead model our love toward other believers after the way *God loved us*, which is through sacrifice. God presented His love for us by sacrificing His Son for our better interest. Walking in this example, we must display our love for other believers by sacrificing our preferences and conveniences for their better interest.

Instead of being self-seeking, we seek the welfare of our brothers and sisters. Instead of demanding our way, we choose to give them preference. Instead of stepping on other believers to *rise above*, we serve them by *going low*, especially those considered the "least" among us. Instead of drawing near to those just like us, we come close to those very different than us in the family of faith. Instead of waiting for them to love us first, we take the initiative and choose to sacrifice for them anyway. This is what it means to love like God loves us. He is the One who sought our better interest, humbled Himself to serve us, came near to those utterly different from Him, initiated toward us even though we didn't treat Him well, and sacrificed His Son for us, the least worthy, to come into His family! May we all love one another with this kind of heavenly love!

Q: *Where do we get the supply of love we are expected to pass on to others? How does this both encourage and humble you?*

Just about the time we start to feel overwhelmed at such a tall order, John gives us incredible news. We aren't expected to muster up this kind of love on our own! In verses 7 and 19 in particular, John reminds us that sacrificial love is sourced by God alone. We can only pass love on to each other due to the Lord first pouring out His love on us. Because God's very nature is love, goodness and mercy flow from Him like a river, filling us up, and giving us the ability to overflow to others. If we seek to love at this sacrificial, good, and merciful level, we must first receive it for ourselves in our daily relationship with God.

As God pours out His love on us day by day, we will be filled up enough to pass that love on to those in our community of faith. We are unable to produce this kind of love on our own. It's a divine thing, and we are mere humans! When we try to love others at this level in our own strength, we will find ourselves pouring from an empty cup, and we will eventually end up burned out. We can only love others well when we constantly return to the reality that God loved us *first*, and that His great love in the gospel is available to us every moment of every day. The love Jesus expects us to pass on to others simply doesn't come from us. It comes from *God* first.

Q: *In what ways do you treat fellow believers half-heartedly or as mere acquaintances instead of like family? In what ways do you love them according to convenience instead of sacrifice?*

Q: *Do you ever find yourself trying to love other believers in your own strength? Do you ever try to muster up divine love for your brothers and sisters on your own? How does this eventually take a toll on you?*

GOD'S LOVE IS PERFECTED WITHIN US

❏ **1 JOHN 4:12-13, 15-18**

Q: *In your own words, what does "abide" mean? How would you explain this concept to a child?*

♀: *What primary thing gives evidence to the fact that God abides in us? How does this challenge you?*

♀: *By what vehicle does God's love abide in us at every moment? How does this encourage you?*

In these verses, John tells us our sacrificial love for each other gives evidence to the fact that God *abides* in us. We wouldn't be able to love in God-like ways if God weren't *in* us, sourcing the whole thing! John then tells us how God abides in us (and us in Him)—through the Holy Spirit who dwells inside (v. 13). To ensure that we are able to love others in divine ways, God put the divine in us! It's an astonishing reality that Christians don't simply share their *own* love with other believers. They are channels which pass on the very love of *God* coursing through them by the Holy Spirit.

Knowing that the Holy Spirit is given to believers to help them pass God's love on to one another, a question emerges. Who has been given the Holy Spirit, exactly? Who gets to experience God "abiding" in them? John answers this clearly in verse 15—anyone who confesses that Jesus is the Son of God. This is great news for us. God abides in all believers, giving them the power to share His love with their brothers and sisters at a divine level!

♀: *What's the result of God's love being "perfected" in us over time (v. 17)? Why do you think God wants this for us? How does this comfort you?*

Next we see that God's love not only *abides* in us through the Holy Spirit, it is *perfected* in us over time (v. 17). As we seek to enjoy God's love within us and live out that love among others around us, we become more and more like Christ over time. This love, which is "perfected" in us over time, results in something glorious—total confidence before the Lord on the day of judgment. If we confess Jesus as Lord, and our actions toward others give clear evidence to that confession, we can stand before God's face unafraid in the end. We are God's children, purchased by the blood of Jesus, walking in His ways, and it is all empowered by the love of God! When we stumble into fear regarding our fate in the end, we can take courage. God's perfect love for us is the very thing perfecting us over time. When we rest in this reality, fear of punishment is expelled. Christ has absorbed the punishment that was due to us, and by walking in this reality in our daily life, we show that we trust that His work is all that is necessary to make us right before God. How comforting it is to know that God doesn't want us to wring our hands in fear. He wants us

to know exactly where we stand with Him, namely, as a Christlike child in His family! How amazing is God's love—one that presents itself in Christ, empowers us to pass it on to others, perfects itself in our life as we seek to live like Christ, and even gives us confidence before the Lord in the day of judgment.

- Q: *If a non-believer asked you why you have confidence about your fate on Judgment Day, how would you answer?*
- Q: *What about God's love in this lesson is a new concept for you? How has 1 John 4 sharpened and encouraged your view of God's love for His people?*

NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God's Word to your daily life. Process how what you've learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

- Q: *God's love is presented to us through Christ being sent to die for our sins. How can you keep this reality fresh in your mind throughout the week, especially in the moments you are tempted to believe the world's definitions of love?*
- Q: *In what ways can you make your love for other believers less self-centered and more sacrificial, embodying the ways Christ loved you?*
- Q: *What are practical ways you can return to God's love as your source when you find yourself trying to serve and love others in your own strength?*
- Q: *In what areas of your life do you still live in fear? How can you battle that fear with the promises of God's love for you?*

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.

- God, thank You for presenting Christ as the ultimate evidence of Your love for me. I am in awe that You would bring me, an enemy, into Your family. Your love is great!
- God, thank You for giving Your Holy Spirit to me, providing Your very presence to ensure that I have the power to pass Your love on to other believers.
- God, reveal to me practical ways I can love my brothers and sisters in the way this passage instructs. Help me see where I'm being self-centered and correct me. Give me clear ideas on how to love sacrificially like Christ has loved me.
- God, thank You for perfecting Your love in me over time, and help me return to Your great love for me when I become fearful.

COMMENTARY

1 JOHN 4:7 John is referencing of a particular kind of love that is found only in those who have been saved and regenerated by Christ. It's important to note, however, that in God's common grace, He gives non-believers the ability to love in certain ways, though they are not complete or perfected in the ways they are in a Christian. Anyone's ability to love, whether Christian or non-Christian, comes by the grace of God. But the believer (the "born of God") has the power to love in divine ways because he or she has the divine implanted within through the Holy Spirit.

1 JOHN 4:8 Though some invert the phrase "God is love" to equate with "Love is God," this is not the Biblical idea. As John makes clear, the controlling principle of the universe is not an abstract quality of love, but a sovereign, living God who is the source of all love. Love has its origin in God, not the other way around.

1 JOHN 4:12 Here John affirms that no one has seen God in His unveiled essence, majesty, and glory. However, the way He can be seen in the world today is in the lives of those who demonstrate His love to others. (Scholars agree that what Moses saw on Sinai and what Isaiah saw in the temple were "theophanies," revelations by which God made Himself visible to the eye.)

**All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes, the New American Commentary (1, 2, 3 John), and the Expositor's Bible Commentary (Hebrews-Revelation). C.S. Lewis quotes are from Mere Christianity.*

