

God is Love (1 John 4:1-16)

Expository Lessons from First Letter of John

I. Background and Review

- a. In the prior lesson John shifted his focus from *practicing righteousness* to *loving our brothers*.
- b. John said that in this call to love one another, he is reminding the Christians of something that they had heard *from the beginning*.
- c. John gave reasons *why* we need to love one another:
 - i. Because *Jesus commanded us* to do that.
 - ii. Because those who do not love their brothers are *like Cain*, who murdered his brother Abel for being more righteous than he was. John says anyone who hates his brother is “a murderer” who has “no eternal life abiding in him”.
- d. We are called to demonstrate real love with *action* (sacrificing time, money and comfort), not just with words. Biblical love is much more than just a feeling. Jesus *laid down His life for us*; therefore, we also ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.
 1. If we see our brother in need and have the ability to help, but instead “*shut up our hearts*”, we do not have the love of God in our hearts. (**1 John 3:17**)

II. Test the Spirits

- a. Read **1 John 4:1-6**.
- b. As we discussed in an earlier lesson in this series, there was a problem with Gnostic thinking in the church that John is addressing in this letter. The Gnostics tended to consider the material world (and the body) to be corrupt and degraded to the point where they tended to reject the incarnation of Christ (the Son of God becoming fully human, even taking on a human body), the physical (bodily) resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of the bodies of all on the Last Day. (For more background on Gnosticism in the early church see Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Eerdmans Publishing.)
 - i. John addresses this Gnostic-type false teaching in his statement, “every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is *not of God*”.

- c. John warned that “*many false prophets* have gone out into the world” (**1 John 4:1**).
- i. While we may not be dealing with this particular heresy of Gnosticism, nevertheless we must keep in mind that there have *always* been false prophets and false teachers in the church.
 1. Peter warned, “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.” (**2 Peter 2:1**, NKJV)
 - ii. Many Christians today believe their particular group is *so good* that they can never imagine having false teachers rising up from within. However, Satan has lulled people to sleep spiritually throughout the ages to accept all kinds of clearly heretical teachings, through the mouth and pen of persuasive teachers and preachers.
 1. However, we are warned repeatedly by Jesus and the apostles that the church will face false teachers.
 2. Satan certainly has not “given up” in his efforts to tempt Christians and to lead us astray!
- d. **Question:** How can we tell if someone is a *false teacher* or a *false prophet*?
- i. Consider some of the classic characteristics.
 1. Look for bad fruit (**Matthew 7:15-20**).
 2. Frequently they are just in it for the money, like Balaam who “loved the wages of unrighteousness” (**2 Peter 2:15; Numbers 22-24, 31**), or in it for power.
 3. Does the teacher tend to take Scriptures out of context to push some agenda?
 - ii. If we know the Scriptures well, and listen carefully to what someone is teaching, we should be able to tell if (and when) they are straying from the truth.
 - iii. Keep in mind that a false teacher can *start off good*, but then depart and go “off the rails” because of greed, desire for power or popularity, or some other type of corruption.

- iv. We should not be surprised or lose our faith because of false teachers in the church we attend. It happened in John's day; we should expect it to happen in our day!
- e. Actually, it may surprise you that a few elements of gnostic-type thinking have persisted today. False teaching found in churches today that is similar to Gnostic-type thinking might include:
 - i. Those "Christians" today who for some reason deny that Jesus was bodily resurrected.
 - ii. Those who hold that only our spirits (not our bodies) will be saved, and that there will be no resurrection of the bodies on the Last Day (in other words, our spirits go straight to heaven after we die).
 - 1. The resurrection of the body is explained in **1 Corinthians 15**. From the beginning, Christians considered it to be one of the core elementary teachings of the faith.
 - a. Resurrection of the body was considered one of the six "elementary principles" of the faith, as listed in **Hebrews 6:1-2**.
 - b. It is also included in the Apostles Creed, an early baptismal confession "I believe in...the resurrection of the body...".
 - iii. Those who (incorrectly) maintain that what we do with our bodies has no bearing on our salvation.
 - 1. Example 1: How we are saved/enter the Kingdom
 - a. Some, taking **Romans 10:9** out of context, have claimed that the only things we need to do in order to be saved are to believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths.
 - b. Therefore, they erroneously conclude that having our bodies baptized in water is unnecessary (despite what it says in **John 3:3-5**, **Titus 3:5**, **Hebrews 10:22**, **Acts 2:38**, **Acts 22:16**, **Mark 16:15-16**, etc.).
 - 2. Example 2: That we are saved by "faith alone" (meaning belief only, that no action is required).
 - a. Those who believe that we will be saved just thorough knowledge or belief; that it is not necessary to *repent of sins of the flesh*.
 - b. The truth is, what we do with our bodies is *very important* in the spiritual realm. Sinning that involves our bodies as well as our spirits

is especially devastating. God's plan is to save both our spirits and our bodies.

- i. As Paul explained, "Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, *but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body*. Or do you not know that *your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit* who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?" (**1 Corinthians 6:18-19**, NKJV)
- f. Let us know the Word of God and not just *go along* with fine-sounding (but incorrect) teachings advanced by church leaders. There *will be* false teachers and false prophets in the church. We must test the spirits, to see if they agree with what we know the Holy Spirit has revealed to us *in the Scriptures*.
- g. We can take comfort that "He who is in" us (the *Spirit of Christ*) is greater than "he who is in the world" (which I assume refers to *Satan*). This is a battle between the spirit of truth vs. the spirit of error (**1 John 4:6**).
- i. As Jesus said, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth." (**John 17:17**, NKJV)
- ii. "In Him you also trusted, after you heard *the word of truth*, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise," (**Ephesians 1:13**, NKJV)
- iii. In a world awash in lies, dominated by Satan who is "a liar" and "the father of lies" (**John 8:44**), the most powerful weapon we have is the light of the truth (**Romans 13:12**, **2 Corinthians 6:7**, **Ephesians 5:10-13**). This is one of the reasons it is so important to meditate daily on the word of God: to know what is true so that we can expose the lies of Satan and others.

III. God is Love

- a. Read **1 John 4:7-16**.
- b. John provides even more reasons why we must love one another.
 - i. Love is *of God*.
 1. God is the source of love. He loved us first; and showed that by sending His Son to be a propitiation (atoning sacrifice) for us.
 2. If God loved us like this, certainly we must love others!
 - ii. If we don't love others, we don't even *know God*, since *God is love*.
 - iii. Love is the distinctive mark of Jesus' disciples.

- c. Here we have the two places in the New Testament where it says, "God is love".
- i. *It seems that everyone likes the statement "God is love"; even the New Age pantheist types who believe that God is the sum of all created things.*
 - ii. Since most people see love as a subjective feeling, saying "God is love" allows them to wrap an imaginary God, made in their own image, into whatever they want or whatever they think is right.
 1. This modern, popular "god" generally accepts almost everything.
 2. This "God is love" statement is frequently taken out of context to justify all types of lifestyles that are directly condemned in the New Testament (including homosexual lifestyle, adultery, fornication, etc.).
 - iii. **Question:** *What does John mean when he says, "God is love"?*
 1. It does not mean "Love is God" (a feeling or sentiment is over all things).
 2. Consider some other "God is (fill-in-the-blank characteristic) statements in Scripture.
 - a. "For our God is *a consuming fire*." (**Hebrews 12:29**, NKJV)
 - i. "For the LORD your God is *a consuming fire, a jealous God*." (**Deuteronomy 4:24**, NKJV)
 - b. "God is *Spirit*, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." (**John 4:24**, NKJV)
 - c. "... God is *faithful*, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able..." (**1 Corinthians 10:13**, NKJV)
 - d. "...God is *light* and in Him is no darkness at all." (**1 John 1:5**, NKJV)
 - e. "...the Lord is *very compassionate and merciful*." (**James 5:11**, NKJV)
 3. In my view, saying "God is love" is similar to making the statement, "the Atlantic Ocean is water".
 - a. The reverse statement *is not* true.
 - i. We say *cannot* say "Love is God" any more than we can say "Water is the Atlantic Ocean". Neither would be a true statement.
 - b. However, we *can also* make additional, equally true statements such as, "The Atlantic Ocean is cold" and "The Atlantic Ocean is salty".

- i. Similarly, in addition to saying “God is love”, we can also say “God is *just*”, “God is *a consuming fire*”, “God is *faithful*”, etc. All of these statements can be true.
 - c. Love is an essential characteristic of God. However, having the character of *love* does not limit God from having other characteristics as well.
- iv. Two problems I see when approaching “God is love”.
 - 1. Some people have a hard time accepting that God really “is love”. They tend to see God as the great judge and/or the killer of all fun and enjoyment in this life.
 - a. **Question:** Deep down in your own heart, do you really see God first and foremost as *a loving God*, and more specifically as a God *who loves you* and who always wants the best for you?
 - b. **More Specific Questions:**
 - i. When you face pain, trials or disappointments in life, do you struggle with blaming God?
 - ii. Do you call into question whether God really loves you?
 - iii. Do you question God or your faith by asking, “Why are these difficult things happening in my life?”
 - iv. Are you like the Israelites in the Wilderness who wanted *to go back to Egypt* (the old life) when they faced trials on their journey? (**Numbers 14:3-4, Acts 7:38-40**)
 - c. Many see God as ‘the *Great Killjoy*’, the One who wants them to be miserable. There are many believers who want to go to heaven in the end, but want to know *how much sin they can get away with in this life* without being disqualified from losing their inheritance.
 - i. **Question:** Do you really believe that every command of God, even the hardest ones, were established by a loving Father, *for our own good*?
 - 1. With my own children, I give them advice that they sometimes do not appreciate, but it is for their own good. I know more than they do; and am trying to help them to avoid unnecessary problems.

2. I see God's role, in giving us commandments for us to follow, in a similar light. He knows things that we don't know; and is telling us these commands with our own long-term best interest in view.
- d. How you see God is sometimes a reflection of how you see (or saw) your earthly, physical father.
 - i. Some of us have had great fathers; while others unfortunately have had fathers who were distant, absent, abusive, unstable, unreliable, liars or enablers.
 - ii. Growing up, I never questioned that my father loved me; therefore, I don't tend to struggle with the idea that God loves me and is looking out for my best interest.
 - iii. I am well aware that many others who had different experiences with their own earthly fathers early in life. For those coming from a more challenging family background, accepting that God truly loves you can be *much more of a struggle*.
 - e. For those who struggle with accepting that God is a loving God, consider the following:
 - i. David's attitude toward God, expressed throughout the psalms.
 1. Read **Psalm 103** (designated **Psalm 102** in Bibles where the Old Testament is based on the Septuagint).
 2. David really understood the love of God: that God cared for him and would protect him. (Consider how David approached Goliath in **1 Samuel 17**, with great confidence that God would grant him the victory.)
 3. In **Psalm 103** David speaks of God's compassion toward those who love Him, fear Him and turn back to Him. David recalls how God had revealed himself to Moses in **Exodus 34:6-7**.
 4. He speaks of God's mercy, how He removes our transgressions "as far as the east is from the west". His mercy toward those who fear Him is as great as "the height of the heavens from the earth".
 5. May we grasp the same picture of God that David had!
 - ii. Ezekiel's understanding of God.

1. Read **Ezekiel 18:27-32**.
 2. This passage speaks about a wicked man who turns back to God. It reveals much about God's character.
 3. God is much more loving and kinder than the religious Jews were. God does not want anyone to die; He wants even the most wicked person to repent and be forgiven, restored and saved. That person is called to turn back to God with a new heart and spirit.
- iii. What Moses said God's attitude would be if, after abandoning God and being punished and scattered, the people repent and turn back to God.
1. Read **Deuteronomy 30:1-6** and **30:9-10**.
 2. God loves us and gives us free choice. Even after we turn away, He is happy to embrace and restore us when we turn back to Him. In fact, Moses (through the Holy Spirit) writes that God will "rejoice over" His people when they return to Him. This is the same attitude Jesus spoke of, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son in **Luke 15**.
 3. Note that this has always been the heart of God, going back to the Old Testament. God did not become any kinder or more loving when Jesus came; He *has always been* full of love.
- iv. In **John 3** we have the well-known statement about how "God so loved the world...".
1. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For *God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son*, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." (**John 3:14-17**, NKJV)
 2. God from the beginning loved us and was willing to do whatever He could (without taking away our free choice to love or reject Him) in order to save us. He even sent His Son into the world to suffer and die on the cross.
 3. Many Protestants, when they refer to this passage, focus only on the importance of our *believing in Jesus*. However, in context

we see Jesus also speaks of the importance of repenting from sin (ceasing to walk in the darkness of evil deeds, coming into the light) if we are to avoid condemnation.

- v. Paul says that God wants *all men* to be saved. He loves everyone and does not want anyone to perish. We should see God in this way, and love others with the same love.
 - 1. “Therefore, I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, *who desires all men to be saved* and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (**1 Timothy 2:1–4**, NKJV)
 - a. This passage alone demolishes a foundational doctrine of Calvinism (that God predetermined salvation for certain pre-selected individuals only).
 - b. God is not just waiting for us to mess up so that He can smite us. He takes no pleasure in the destruction of the ungodly; He wants *all men* to repent and be saved.
 - c. A side challenge we find in this passage: to pray for the authorities in government, that we may live in peace that the gospel may spread unhindered.
 - i. Keep in mind that when Paul was writing this, he was in the Roman Empire, under a corrupt ruler, Caesar. According to history, Paul ended up being beheaded by the Roman authorities. Nevertheless, he called them (and us) to pray for the governing authorities.
 - ii. There has been tremendous division in the United States recently between the President and Congress (with the Speaker of the House of Representatives trying to get the President impeached and removed from office).
 - d. Christians should be *praying for all leaders in the government*.
 - i. In the U.S., that would include praying for *both* the President *and* the Speaker of the House (regardless of our personal political leanings).

- ii. We also should pray for a time of peace, that the gospel can be spread around the world unhindered.
- f. Many people are looking for some visible sign to confirm that God *really does* love them.
 - i. I recall preachers at weddings commenting that the nice weather on the wedding day was a sign of God's approval on the couple about to be married.
 - ii. Consider, what does that say for the couple whose wedding falls on a day when it rains or snows; or what if there is a hailstorm?
 - iii. God has already provided us with the only sign we need to show that He really does love us. He sent His Son to die on the cross, to redeem us!
- g. If we are facing trials in this life, it is because Satan is sifting us, while our loving God is using this to refine our faith.
 - 1. Satan wants to sift those who strive to follow Jesus.
 - a. "And the Lord said, 'Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may *sift you as wheat*.'" (**Luke 22:31**, NKJV)
 - b. **Question:** Do you really think that Peter was *the only person* whom Satan wanted to sift, as wheat? What about all the other millions of people who would later want to follow Jesus? Wouldn't Satan want to sift us, as well?
 - i. Consider also how Satan asked to sift Job, and what that entailed (**Job 1-3**). The perseverance of Job in the face of suffering is an example that we are called to imitate (**James 5:10-11**).
 - ii. We should expect to face suffering at the hands of Satan, who wants to sift us (and our faith) as well.
 - 2. God will use trials and suffering to test and refine our faith.
 - a. "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that *the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire*, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible

and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.” (1 Peter 1:6–9, NKJV)

- b. This also reminds me of a passage in **Zechariah**: “And it shall come to pass in all the land,’ says the LORD, ‘That two-thirds in it shall be cut off and die, But one-third shall be left in it: I will bring the one-third through the fire, will refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, and I will answer them. I will say, “This is My people”; And each one will say, “The LORD is my God.”” (Zechariah 13:8–9, NKJV)
 - i. From this passage we see that a minority will want to follow God; and those people will be tested and refined as silver and gold are, through fire.
 - ii. Those who pass the test, whose faith is proven as genuine, will be God’s special people. He will say of them, “*This* is My people”; and we will be able to say “The Lord is our God”.
3. God’s plan is to test/ prove/ refine us and our faith through trials, as He did with Abraham in **Genesis 22**, and to the heroes of faith described in **Hebrews 11**. His plan is to perfect us through suffering, to prove our faith is genuine. Even Jesus Himself was made perfect (= *complete*) through suffering (**Hebrews 2:10**) and proved His faith genuine.
 4. In **Hebrews 12:1-13** it speaks of the suffering Christians will face, as a refining chastening from the Lord. The Hebrews writer quotes from **Proverbs 3:11-12** to instruct us that “Whom the Lord loves He chastens”. While this may be painful at the time, it produces “the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (**Hebrews 12:11**).
 5. Given the above, we should expect trials and tribulations, which God will allow, to strengthen our faith. These are the “signs of God’s love” we should be looking for, in addition to the sign of His love for us by giving us His only son, to die for us on the cross.
 - ii. Let us consider how Clement of Alexandria (Christian teacher in Alexandria, Egypt understood the loving nature of God. Writing c. 195 AD, Clement used the illustration of a mother bird’s attitude toward its young who are in danger:

1. “For God, of His great love to man, comes to the help of man, as the mother-bird flies to one of her young that has fallen out of the nest; and if a serpent open its mouth to swallow the little bird, the mother flutters round, uttering cries of grief over her dear progeny; and God the Father seeks His creature, and heals his transgression, and pursues the serpent, and recovers the young one, and incites it to fly up to the nest.”
 2. (Source: Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, chapter 10; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, p. 197)
2. While some believers fail to recognize how loving God is, many other believers *swing to the other extreme*. They tend to ignore or *downplay the other characteristics of God* (his holiness, judgment, wrath, etc.) and want to focus only on God’s love. Furthermore, they often reduce God’s love to nothing more than *sentimentality, and tolerance of unrepentant sin*.
 - a. Instead, may we all strive to see God clearly, having a balanced understanding that encompasses *all aspects* of His character.
 - b. As Paul exhorted the Roman Christians, “Therefore consider the *goodness and severity* of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.” (**Romans 11:22**, NKJV)
 - d. If we understand that “God is love” (meaning that love is a *core attribute* of God):
 - i. We will love other people, as a natural outpouring of our faith.
 - ii. We will imitate the sacrificial love that God first showed to us.
 - iii. We will want all other men to be saved, despite what they may have done to us or to others.
 - iv. If we abide in the love of God, then God will abide in us.