

We Love Him Because He First Loved Us.

Text: 1 John 4:16-21

1) How God First Loved Us

Suggested Hymns:

2) How We Should Love Him In Return

394, 344, 369, 360, 164

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is 1 John 4:16–21, ¹⁶ *And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.* ¹⁷ *Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world.*

¹⁸ *There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.* ¹⁹ *We love Him because He first loved us.* ²⁰ *If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?* ²¹ *And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Love is the great theme of our Epistle. In our day the praise of love is sung everywhere. It is almost universally believed that the way of love is the way to heaven. Even many of those who claim to be Christians expect to gain heaven by the works of love which they perform. It is not by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that they expect to reach heaven.

The tendency of our time is to cast aside the doctrine of justification by grace through faith as an old-fashioned doctrine, and to raise the standard of love in its place. Even preachers who call themselves preachers of the Gospel will tell you nowadays that all you need to reach heaven is to perform the works of love.

They will tell you that in the yonder world God will not take into consideration what religion you have professed in life, whether you have been a

Christian, or a Jew, or a Mohammed, or a Buddhist, or a heathen, but that He will reward you according to your works, and the more love and sympathy you have shown in life, the greater will be your reward in heaven.

It is true that we can never do enough in the way of urging people to perform the works of love. For by nature we are loveless and selfish; everybody is an egotist by nature. The more we preach love, the more we succeed in getting people to conquer their selfishness and to practice the works of love, the more good will be accomplished in this life, and the more distress will be removed in this vale of tears.

But when the standard of love is raised at the expense of faith, when faith is pushed aside and love is put in its place, when it is claimed that it is not faith which ultimately saves, but love, this is a flat denial of the Christian religion, and rank heathenism is substituted for Christianity.

For is there any truth which has been set forth in clearer terms in the Bible than this truth, that we are saved by faith alone and not in any other way? Does not God say in language which cannot be misunderstood, such as in Romans 3:28, ²⁸ *Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law?* and in Ephesians 2:8–9, ⁸ *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast?*

And when the keeper of the prison asked Paul and Silas, “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*”? did they not answer, “*Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ?*”?¹ What would the Saviour from sin and death be for, if by the works of love which we perform we could gain heaven?

Moreover, it is to be well noted that faith and love always go together. It is utterly impossible for a person to be a true believer in Jesus Christ, and not to show sympathy and love. The works of love are the test by which you can see whether you are a true believer or not.

If truly you believe, love will and must dwell in your heart, as the Apostle says, “*We love Him because He first loved us.*” This is our theme for today. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. How God First Loved Us.

“God is love.” This is the introductory statement of our Epistle. God is love. What a grand revelation! The Apostle does not merely say that God is loving and kind, but that God is love itself. His essence is love. Could anything more beautiful be said of God?

Luther gives this explanation: *“God is love itself, and His essence is nothing but love, so that, if any one would picture God, he would have to draw a picture which is pure love, as if the divine nature were nothing but a furnace and glow of such love as fills heaven and earth.*

And again, if any one could picture love, he would have to make a picture which is not earthly and human, aye, not angelic and heavenly, but God Himself.”

Indeed, if we could see God, as once we will see Him face to face, we would see nothing but love. God is a Spirit; we cannot see Him and cannot make a picture of Him, as little as we can see love itself. But if any one loves us, we can perceive from the way he treats us and deals with us that he cherishes such a feeling towards us. And in this way we can perceive from God’s conduct towards us that God is love, and that He first loved us.

He manifested His love in the creation. God has made you, has given you your body and soul, eyes and ears, and all your members, your reason, and all your senses. What induced God to create you? Does He derive any benefit from you? Could He not dwell in glory and in unmistakable happiness without you? Yet God has called you into existence. What, then, must have induced God to bring you forth? It was His love to you.

You are a creature of His love, and His desire is to spend His love upon you. Every human soul is a product of God’s love. He loved us all when He created us, before we had an opportunity of loving; and thus He first loved us. And why does God preserve you still? What induces God to provide you with all the necessities of life, with clothing and shoes, with meat and drink, and with everything that you need for the support of your body?

What induces God to place all His visible creatures at your disposal, giving you dominion over the fish of the sea, and the fowl of the air, and every living thing that moves upon the earth, and bidding the sun to give you light, the clouds to give you rain, the earth to produce its fruit for you?

What is it but the love of God who first loved us, who gives daily bread even to the wicked, who is good to all, and whose tender mercies are over all His works? If we but open our eyes, we can perceive the love of God everywhere in His creation. The birds sing it in the trees, the flowers show it in the fields, the breezes whisper it to us, all nature around us proclaims the great truth: *“God is love.”*

However, the best of God’s love remains to be told. Not only in the creation did God love us first and in the preservation, ordaining all His creatures, even those blessed invisible creatures, His holy angels, to minister to us. The greatest manifestation of God’s love to us is our redemption.

If we could look into God’s very heart, and see how much He loves us, we must see His dear Son Jesus Christ. *“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”*² Is not this the climax of love? Is there anything in the world to be compared to the love which God has shown us in Christ?

If from a true heart we love any one, we are fondly attached to him, we seek to please him, we confer benefits on him, we willingly go to any trouble for him, and we even deprive ourselves of things and suffer to make him happy.

But when our love meets with no response, or when ingratitude is the reward which we reap, how quickly our love vanishes and dies, how soon is it turned into the reverse, into hatred and bitterness! How different is the love of God! Here we are, His enemies, sinners, an abomination in His sight, creatures in whom He sees nothing whatever to please Him.

We read in Psalm 14:2–3, ² *The LORD looks down from heaven upon the children of men, To see if there are any who understand, who seek God.* ³ *They have all turned aside, They have together become corrupt; There is none who does good, No, not one.*

And yet God loves us, loved us so dearly that He sacrificed for us that which was nearest and dearest to Him, His only-begotten Son, whom He sent into this world that He should save us from the terrible doom which is awaiting us in the hereafter because we are sinners, to remove from us the guilt of our sin, and to obtain for us life everlasting by His great redemptive work, by His painful suffering and bitter death on the cross.

The question has been raised, *Whom did God love more, His own Son or the fallen world?* The answer has been made, *He loved the fallen world even more than His own Son; for He spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all.*

John says in the chapter from which our Epistle is taken, 1 John 4:9–10, *⁹In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

Thus God first loved us. Is there any language for such love? Surely, it is beyond our comprehension!

2. How We Should Love Him In Return.

And now, in the second place, let us see how we should love God in return.

Here we must note, first of all, that by nature we are in such a depraved state that we are utterly incapable of loving God. By nature we love anything else but God. *“The carnal mind is enmity against God.”*³ By nature we all hate God in spite of His love toward us, and before we can be made to love God, our sinful hearts must be changed.

As the Prophet Ezekiel says, the stony heart must be taken out of our flesh, and a heart of flesh be given to us.⁴ We must be born again and be made new creatures. We must be brought to the knowledge of our sin by the Law and to a living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ by the Gospel. And if by the working of God’s Holy Spirit true faith has been engendered in us, we begin to love God in return who first loved us. But how do we love Him in return?

Our text says, *he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.* This does not mean that any one who performs works of charity has thereby entered into a close relation to God. It does not mean that even unbelievers and godless people can unite themselves with God by the works of love which they perform.

It does not speak of the works of love done to the neighbour when it says *“he who abides in love,”* but of our love to God. *“He who abides in love”* is the person who has come to the faith and has begun to love God. If you truly begin

to love God, you enter into communion with God; God dwells in you and you in Him.

How, then, should we love God who first loved us? With an abiding indwelling love, with love which never ceases, with love which holds out in the days of adversity as well as in the days of prosperity, with love so firmly rooted in our hearts that nothing in heaven or on earth can rob us of it.

The Apostle says furthermore, ¹⁷ *Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world.* ¹⁸ *There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.*

Our love to God should be perfect. It is true that our love to God is never made absolutely perfect in this sinful life so that it could no longer be improved upon. Our love to God is not made absolutely perfect until we reach heaven and see God face to face.

But we speak of a thing being perfect in two different ways. We say that a thing is perfect if all the essential parts are there that constitute the thing, even though there may be a defect in some of these constituting parts. And secondly, we say that a thing is perfect if, not only, all the parts are there, but if all these parts are perfect in themselves.

In this latter way our love to God is never made perfect in this world. But in the former way it must be perfect. All the constituent parts must be there. And there are two parts of love to which the Apostle calls special attention, fearlessness and boldness.

“Perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment,” and *“There is no fear in love.”* If you truly love God, you will surely not be afraid that He might hurt and harm you. See, then, that your heart be filled with confidence in your heavenly Father, and your love to God will be made perfect.

Banish from your mind all thoughts of fear when you are assailed with doubts as to your soul’s salvation, or with earthly cares, or with sorrow and grief.

Fear not. Do not fear the God in whom you trust because He is the God of your salvation who will not leave you nor forsake you. He will provide for you and make all things work together for your own eternal good.

Then will you have boldness also in the day of judgement. That day will be a day of terror to unbelievers and godless people, but not for those who have been made perfect in love. Joyfully you will look up and lift up your head on that day, because your redemption is at hand.

Finally, we should love God in return who first loved us by loving our brethren, our neighbours, and our fellow-men. For if in the faith we love others, God will look upon our works of love as if they were done to Him.

Jesus says in Matthew 25:40, *inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.* John therefore says at the end of our Epistle, ²⁰*If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?* ²¹*And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.*

In other words, it is an easier thing to love the neighbour whom you have before you, than to love God whom you do not see. Now, if a man really does the greater and more difficult thing, if he really loves God whom he does not see, how much more will he do the lesser and easier thing and love the neighbour whom he sees, — how much the more, since God whom he loves has given him the commandment to love his neighbour! It is therefore utterly impossible, it is an outright lie, that a man can love God but not love his neighbour.

O what an appeal to us to show love, to banish from our hearts all hatred and malice, to agree quickly with our adversaries, to extend the hand of reconciliation to those who have wronged us, to help, to dry tears, and to do good to others wherever an opportunity is presented!

O let us show and prove always more and more that we love God in return who first loved us by the works of love done to the neighbour! Let us conclude with this word of Scripture, Galatians 6:10, ¹⁰*Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.* Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Acts 16:30

² John 3:16

³ Romans 8:7

⁴ Ezekiel 36:26