

Love

2/2/20 dkm

Read: Romans 8:18-39, 1John 4:1-12

Text: 1John 4:7-12

Psalms: 36:5-10, 103:8-18, 86:1-7 & 15-17, 134

A famous basketball player was openly critical of the way minorities were being treated in China. He was admired for taking a stand on behalf of men and women suffering persecution in China. The communist government heard of his criticism and cancelled the upcoming tour of his team. This tour was set to bring in millions of dollars, so this player promptly retracted his criticism.

A lot is said and done by way of good works, as long as no personal cost is involved. A lot of love is shown, as long as it is appreciated or recognized in some tangible way. The world sees and knows little of self-sacrificing love, the sort of love referred to in the Bible by the Greek word '*agape*'. In fact, this word is rarely found outside the Bible, while other Greek words for love, '*philia*' and '*eros*' are rarely, if ever, found in the Bible. But when we hear the word 'love' outside the church it is either brotherly love (*philia*) or most commonly passionate or sexual love (*eros*). So in listening to the Bible we must not think it is talking about the love we hear of in movies and read of in novels.

John is often called the 'apostle of love' because of what he writes in this letter. He uses the word 'love' more than any other Biblical writer, including Paul in 1Corinthians 13! We come to some of the best known verses in the Bible, but verses that can be taken out of context and misunderstood. Many twist these words around and say 'love is God', and not just Hindus and other religions. 'God is love' is often understood merely as 'God is loving' but it refers to the very essence or nature of God; it is not just an attribute of God but a definition of who or what God is. I sometimes wonder why the writers of our Confession did not include this in the answer to question 4 of the Shorter Catechism, 'What is God?'

Many think that an act of love, as they define love, is somehow god-like. But what is love? We know love, *agape* love, only by looking at Jesus, who laid down his life for us (3:16). John further explains this love, taking us into the depths of divine love. He continues writing against the background of false teachers and how the church can test its teachers regarding their orthodoxy. These tests centre around doctrine, their doctrine of Christ, around the commandments, and around brotherly love: some refer to these as doctrinal, moral and social tests.

Here in these verses he takes up the test of brotherly love for the third time (cf. 2:9-11, 3:10-18). He declares brotherly love to be more than just evidence of walking in the light (2:9), or of having eternal life (3:14). Brotherly love stems from the very nature of the God we confess. In exhorting us to 'love one another' (4:7, 11, 12) he writes, 'Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God' because 'God is love' (4:7, 8). Love, of course, does not bring us to God or make us god-like because unless we know Jesus and his love we do not know or practice love. God, not humanity, is the source of true, unselfish love. John's concern however, is for people in the church and for those who confess Christ, to be loving their brothers and sisters in Christ in tangible ways (3:16-18). One's confession should be questioned if love is not demonstrated within the fellowship: 'He who does not love does not know God!' (4:8).

John is here referring to God the Father; in the following verses he refers to God the Son, and God the Spirit. The Trinity is united in love: 'the same substance' referred to in Shorter Catechism Q6 includes the substance of love. God is love and our relationship to him is based on love. We keep his commands because of love (John 14:23). Because of love his commands are not burdensome (5:3). If our relationship to God is based on love, so must be our relationship to one another. 'Beloved, if God so loved us we ought also to love one another' (4:11). John briefly but profoundly explains the love of

God in three ways: God's nature, God's historic love in Jesus, God's love perfected in us.

1. God's nature

Jesus tells us that God is Spirit (John 4:24). He is real but unseen (4:12). The apostle John tells us that God is light (1John 1:5). Light, both physical and spiritual, is of the essential nature of God (Rev 21:23). He now tells us that God is love (4:8, 16). Neither darkness nor hatred belong to the essence of God; so neither can reside in the heart of a born-again believer who is in relationship with God.

'Like father like son' we say when we see a son reflecting not just the physical features of his father but his mannerisms and behaviour: 'he is just like his father' we say. When people comment that you are just like your father, could they be referring to your father in heaven? These days we attribute everything to the DNA we inherit, but most of our behaviour is learnt, learnt from our parents; we are not slaves to our DNA. We are of course, slaves to Satan by virtue of our humanity, unless and until we are born again of the Spirit of God and become children of God (3:1, 4:4).

'Because God is the source and origin of love, all true love derives from him'. So everyone who loves with God's love is born of God and knows God (4:1). As God's only begotten Son, and the second person of the Trinity, Jesus of course, knows such love. He showed that love in everything he did and said while walking in our world. He spoke about such love, telling us to love one another, and even to love our enemies (Mat 5:44). Jesus condensed the commandments into two love commandments, love God and love your neighbour (Mat 23:36-40). He did not see anyone practicing such love but knew that with hearts changed by the power of the Holy Spirit his disciples, and all who believed in him, would be able to practice such love. Not that it would be automatic; it would require serious, ongoing commitment and prayer on the part of a believer to live a life of love. Knowing that God is love is the starting point of such commitment.

2. God's historic love in Jesus

God is love. His love is revealed to us in his sending Jesus into this sinful world, a world that knows nothing of true love. His chosen people, Israel, knew something of God's love. He chose them or set his love upon them (Deut 7:7). In covenant love, he protected them and provided for them, giving them a land flowing with milk and honey. But a 'fuller' revelation of God's love awaited his sending of his Son into this world. He sent Jesus into this world because of his love for us (4:3, John 3:16). God gave his only begotten Son.

Gifts cost something- or they used to! We search the stores for the best gift we can find for one we love. To buy this gift we might have to save up or work overtime, or spend time making a special gift. I hope you don't give a loved one something that cost you nothing! God's gift to us cost him everything. It was not just one son of many but his one and only Son. It was in fact, the second person of the Trinity. It was God himself who came into this world to dwell among us. What condescension! What humiliation! Truly, this was the light shining in a dark place. Truly, this was life being lived in the midst of death. God sent his Son to deliver us from death. He sent him 'that we might live through Him' (4:9).

Having been sent into this world, how was Jesus going to give us life? How was he going to deliver us from death? We see God's love going even deeper as we look at the cross. God sent his one and only Son to die for us, to be the propitiation or atoning sacrifice for our sins (4:10). It was a blood sacrifice (5:6). A sacrifice which cost us nothing but cost God everything. He gave his only begotten Son to die for our sins, yes our sins. It was sin that brought death to us. We were born dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). It is the death of the unique Son of God that brings us life, life everlasting.

We can do nothing to save ourselves. How foolish to think that we, of our own free will, can love God, that we can initiate a

reconciliation with the God against whom we have sinned. 'In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us' (4:10). God initiated and completed the reconciliation. He did it in Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5).

We see even deeper into God's love when we understand just how serious was our separation, how deep was the chasm between us. God cannot look upon sin (Hab 1:13). There was nothing in us that made God love us- apart from sin and misery! Yes, God loved the world when there was nothing lovely or deserving about the world of sinful men and women. 'O, wretched, man that I am, who will deliver me'- 'Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift' (Rom 7:24, 2Cor 9:15). The world knows nothing of such love but I pray you know something of it, and that you want to know more of it, that you want to comprehend more of this love that 'surpasses knowledge' (Eph 3:18-19).

The more you comprehend God's amazing *agape* love, the more you will want to reflect such love in your life. John Stott writes, 'No one who has been to the cross and seen God's immeasurable and unmerited love displayed there can go back to a life of selfishness'. 'Beloved', says the apostle of love, 'Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another' (4:11). John arrives back at the commandment to love one another, the test of genuine faith (3:23, 4:7). It is a commandment, a commandment we obey more out of appreciation than out of duty.

3. God's love perfected in us

We come to John's third and final point as he argues that we must love one another. He told us that God is love. He told us that God gave his only begotten Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Now he tells us that, 'His [God's] love has been perfected in us' (4:12). Before this he sets the scene by reminding us that no one has seen God at any time. God is Spirit and a spirit, by definition, is invisible. We read of theophanies in the OT; we even read that Moses and

others 'saw the God of Israel' (Exod 24:10). But John does not consider such visions as seeing God himself, because this is not possible for a human being. God can of course, make himself visible, which he did in sending his Son in the likeness of men (John 1:18, Phil 2:7). John had seen the Son of God. He saw God's love displayed in the life of Jesus, and supremely in his death. But after rising from the dead Jesus returned to heaven. Jesus said, 'By this will all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another' (John 13:35).

John is saying much the same thing when he writes, 'If we have love for one another, God abides in us and his love has been perfected in us' (4:12), or 'his love is made complete in us' (4:12 NIV). What does John mean by 'in us'? 'God is at work in us by his Spirit to bring that love to completion'. It is 'in us' as God abides in us, and as we abide in God. As difficult as it is to believe, and astonishing, we are now God's instruments in showing his love to the world. Stott writes, 'Today God's love is seen in our love'. Love cannot be demonstrated of course, when we live to ourself or live the life of a recluse. Divine love is seen in relationships, and in the fellowship of believers.

The apostle Paul told husbands to 'love your wives just as Christ loved the church' (Eph 5:25). He could have told all of us to love one another 'as Christ loved the church' because love for one another in the fellowship is no less a demonstration of divine love. Paul used the word '*agape*' for the husband's love for his wife. Love for one another must be seen in a Christian marriage, in a Christian family, and above all in a Christian church. God ordained marriage, God ordained families, and God ordained the church. The church is vital in the witness of God's love to the world.

Have you ever thought of the church in such terms? Or do you come to church only to get something out of it for yourself? Some churches are full of egos, with everyone wanting to do their own thing. Some actually say they are not getting anything out of church and leave.

They have a very different view of the church to the apostle John, and indeed to Jesus himself. In fact, loving one another, which means brothers and sisters in Christ, is a test of one's being in Christ and of having eternal life.