

RCC in the Word
Week of January 21

1 John 4

God is love

Have you started to detect a pattern in the way John writes this letter? When you read through once at a normal pace it sounds repetitive, doesn't it? Many of the same words, and seemingly the same point being made over and over. Is he just talking in circles? Couldn't he have been more organized and kept the "belief section" in one place, the "obedience section" in another, the "love section" in another? John talks about love throughout the letter from beginning to end. He also brings up sin from start to finish, along with fellowship, abiding in God, the Spirit, the Son, the world, the truth, and eternal life. He is writing "to those who believe...that you may know you have eternal life." (5:13). He is also writing to "proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us..." (1:3).

John is bringing us the gospel and giving believers both instruction for and evidence of their life in Christ. If you were to draw a chart of the main themes of this letter it would not be a line with a beginning and end, with points made along the way. It would be more of a web with arrows pointing in both directions between connecting themes, and each theme would have an arrow pointing to all the other themes. Far from a mess, this letter is a masterpiece.

So how does such a beautiful piece of writing that introduces the whole gospel, outlines the whole gospel, illustrates the whole gospel, exhorts living in light of the gospel, warns against living outside of the gospel, and does so in way that continuously builds in both detail and weight...get hijacked by taking one sentence out of context and applying its meaning to any number of things (none of which are truth)?

You hear someone say, "God is love..." attached to error and you have 90 seconds to give them (and whoever else is present) the truth about what that actually means, with gentleness and respect. What do you say? Let's spend a bit more than 90 seconds thinking it through so that at the end we can have a clear thought process and be prepared to make a defense of the reason for the hope that is in us.

First, let us consider the statement itself. God is love. When God gave Moses a name to tell the people of Israel who sent him, it was I AM. The one true living God is immutable. That is, he does not and cannot change. He is also eternal, with no beginning and no end. So the nature and attributes of God are from everlasting to everlasting. Therefore, one way we can understand who God is, is by his attributes. God is love. God is holiness. God is justice. God is mercy. A worthwhile exercise would be to meditate on the attributes of God, adding to our list each day.

We are created in God's image. Therefore, the definition of words we use including love, holiness, justice, mercy and so on are based on God's character and actions as revealed in scripture. However, total depravity does not spare our vocabulary. And so in this fallen world, even (or especially) the word love is commonly misrepresented. It is given a definition based on fallen man, and it varies

from culture to culture, person to person. This misuse of the word love is unfortunate, but the greater offense is when man then takes this statement “God is love” and turns the whole formula back the other direction. Man has a definition of love based on his own sinful mind and experiences. He reads “God is love” and thereby ascribes to God the attribute of his incorrect definition of love. This is idolatry, making a God in our own image, suitable to our own liking. Beloved, this should not be. God does not need us to defend his character. However, we are a holy nation, a royal priesthood, and ambassadors for Christ. It is our job to proclaim the gospel to all, and so it is appropriate to speak the truth in love (the real kind), and correct inappropriate use of Holy Scripture.

How then is God love? A fundamental truth to understand the answer to that question is the fact that God is triune. God is eternal, and he is three persons. Therefore each of the three persons is God. Each of the three persons is therefore also eternal. We often think of the creation as “the beginning”. But God was before “the beginning”, and he cannot change, and he is love. So God was love before creation. How was the love of God demonstrated before creation? See John 17 for a description of how the Father was loving the Son before the foundation of the world. He was also loving his elect, knowing them and writing their names in the Lamb's book of life before the foundation of the world (see Revelation). Were we loveable before the foundation of the world? We certainly weren't loveable after we were born! Looking more immediately at our text in 1 John then, how do we know, from God's perspective, what love is?

Love is defined in this text by what God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the abiding in God through the Holy Spirit, to the purpose that we may have confidence for the day of judgment. 1 John 3:16 says, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us...” 1 John 4:9-10 expands on that, “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, 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.” John often states that the way we love God is by keeping his commandments. How do we keep his commandments? 1 John 3:24 states, “Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this, we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.” 1 John 4:13 again builds on that point, “By this, we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us his Spirit.” 1 John 4:16 ties so much of the gospel message all together with the statement, “So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.” Finally, we are reminded that because of this great love with which God has loved us, we need not fear our destination in eternity. 1 John 4:17-18, “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. 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.”

So what is your 90 second (or less) reply to the errant use of “God is love”? I would really appreciate it if you would write it down and email it to me to compile and share.

Having an accurate understanding of what love is, let us consider now the instructions in this text. We are told over and over to love one another. It is a (or part of “the”) commandment. This part of the letter shifts the focus of the evidence

of our salvation from walking in the light vs walking in darkness, to loving vs hating our brothers and sisters in Christ. Again, how do we obey any commandment of God? By abiding in him. And how do we know we do that? By the Spirit, he has given us. And how do we know who has the Spirit in them? 1 John 4: 2-3, "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God." 1 John 4:15, "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him and he in God." Those with the Holy Spirit will also listen to those that speak the truth of God. 1 John 4:6, "We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this, we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error."

Having confessed that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that he has come in the flesh, we listen to the teaching of the apostles and Christ himself as recorded for us in the Word, we trust in Christ alone as the propitiation of our sins and walk with him in the light, we affirm that the Holy Spirit is in us and therefore we abide in God and God in us. 1 John 4:11, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." How do we do that?

For starters, we should not kill each other. In fact, we should be willing to die for one another. 1 John 3:15-16, "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this, we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." Again we see love equated with sacrifice of our own life, contrasted with hate being equated with the taking of life. In a less intense but not less important way to show love for each other, we should help one another while we are making our way in this world. 1 John 3:17-18, "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth." Finally, we can be faithful to the confession that Jesus is Lord. We are bonded by nothing if not "that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ..."

I love you.

-Written by Jason Yocum