

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 4, 2012

TO LOVE AND BE LOVED

1 John 4:7-12

THE GREAT COMMANDMENT

Last Sunday, we put the Scriptural spotlight on the Great Commandment to love God first, foremost, and totally, with everything we are and everything we have – with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, with our time, our talents and treasures, with our energy, emotions and enthusiasm, our minds and muscles, our passion and prayers and possessions – and to love our neighbors, whoever they are and wherever they are, as we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31; Matthew 22:37-38). Jesus added a new dimension to our mandate to love by giving His disciples “a new command” to “love one another.” He told them to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34). As followers of the Lord Jesus today, we are to love each other with the same kind of love with which He has loved us – a self-giving, self-emptying, sacrificial love which took Jesus from the glories of heaven to a stable in Bethlehem and ultimately to the cross, there to willingly lay down His life for us, to make atonement for our sins, to repair the damage caused by our rebellion against God’s gracious rule, and to restore our relationship to God.

Dearly beloved, there is never a time when it is not time to love God above all else, with the totality of who we are and what we are. There is never a time when God is not deserving of our love, our devotion and worship. Never a time. There is never a time when our duty to love our neighbors is not in force. And there is never a time when it is not the right time to love each other in the fellowship of Christ’s church and all the “one anothers” God has sovereignly placed in our lives, with the same kind of love with which God loves us. Never a time. Not ever.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF LOVE

We have to acknowledge, though, that love means different things to different people. There are different kinds of love, and different ways of describing or defining it. The great American poet Robert Frost, for example, noted that, for some people, “love is the irresistible desire to be desired irresistibly.” Whether he made this observation before or after “Stopping by woods on a snowy evening” (the title of one of his most famous poems), there is no question that Robert Frost accurately describes a certain kind of love, the object of which is clearly the self. If the true goal of one’s conception of love is to be “desired irresistibly” by another, then the primary if not the sole object of this love is *me*. It is not about you or anyone else. It is all about me and my desires to be the object of someone’s desire.

C. S. Lewis famously described different kinds of love in his book *The Four Loves*, in which he examined four Greek words for love: *storge*, *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*.

Storge refers to the kind of affection family members have for one another, together with a deep sense of loyalty to one another because of their family ties. *Storge* love is not exclusive to families, though. Teammates or members of any group or organization with a common cause may exhibit this kind of love for one another.

Philia is friendship love. It is love between friends who care for and about each other.

Eros, the third word for love, is used to describe romantic love or the passionate desire for another person. It is a love that seeks fulfillment in sexual intimacy. This kind of love, as Leon Morris pointed out in his book *Testaments of Love: A Study of Love in the Bible*, is not inherently evil. It is not sinful by definition. The key is what we do, or refrain from doing, to keep our desires and actions within the boundaries God has put in place for our blessing and our protection from harm. *Eros* unrestrained – *eros* gone wild, *eros* with no boundaries – exposes our innate selfishness, compounds the brokenness of our lives, and further reveals the emptiness of making an idol of sex.

GOD'S KIND OF LOVE

The fourth kind of love is *agape*, which, as I'm sure most of you know, is the distinctive New Testament word for love. It is the kind of love God shows to a world full of sinners who don't deserve it, and never will. Undeserving sinners like us. It is the love Jesus demonstrated for us not only in His suffering and death on the cross, but in the whole course of His life on earth.

- It is John 3:16 love: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son ..."
- It is John 13 love, where Jesus took on the role of a servant and washed the feet of His disciples as an expression of His love for them.
- It is Romans 5:8 love: "But God demonstrates His love for us in this: While we were still sinners [lost in our sins, dead in our sins, in rebellion against God and His rule], Christ died for us." God sees us for what we are, and loves us anyway.
- It is Galatians 2:20 love, where Paul testifies: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."
- It is 1 John 3 love.

Verse 1 says: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us,
that we should be called the children of God!

And that is what we are!"

And verse 16: "This is how we know what love is;
Jesus Christ laid down His life for us."

- It is also 1 John 4 love, seen in the verses we read earlier.

Verse 7 says: "... (L)ove comes from God."

God is the source and origin of love. Love begins with God, not us.

Verse 8: "God is love" (verse 16 also).

Everything God does, is done in love as an act of His love.

Love is the essence of God's nature and being.
 Love, however, does not define God. God defines love. (Wiersbe)
 Love is defined by what God has done to show it.

Verse 9 and 10: "This is how God showed His love among us:
 He sent His one and only Son into the world
 that we might live through Him.
 This is love: Not that we loved God, but that He loved us
 and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."
 Were it not for God's initiative in loving us
 and the demonstrations of His love for us,
 we would not know what love is
 nor how to love with God's kind of love.

Verse 11: "... (S)ince God so loved us, we ought to love one another."
 Our love for one another, like our love for God Himself,
 is a response to His love for us.
 We don't love God or one another *so that* God will love us.
 We love God *because* He first loved us (verse 19).
 And we can love one another because of His love for us.
 Our duty to love one another with God's kind of love
 springs from the indisputable fact of God's gracious love for us.

Verse 12: "... (I)f we love one another,
 God lives in us and His love is made complete in us."
 Even though God does not make personal appearances
 and our physical eyes cannot see Him,
 when we love with God's kind of love,
 when we love one another as Christ loves us,
 we make God "visible" to people around us
 by showing what God is like.

Do you know that in these six verses (7-12), John uses the word *agape* in one form or another 15 times? Twice John uses it to express his own love for the recipients of the letter, calling them "Beloved" (*agapetoi*) in verses 7 and 11. He uses it seven times to speak of God's loving nature or His love for us, and six more times in reference to our love, or lack of love, for God or one another.

LOVED BY GOD

What is clear from all of this is that God loves us not because we deserve it and not because there is anything in us to commend us to Him. God loves us because of who He is, not because of who or what we are. In fact, He loves us in spite of what we are. Because God loves us with an undeserved, unconditional, unfailing love –

because He loves you just as you are,
 and He knows what you are really like;

even though He knows the ways you have hurt others
 and the scars you have on your heart
 from all the times you've been hurt;
 even though He knows all the times and all the ways you've messed up,
 and all the things you feel guilty about;
 even though He knows about all the times when you were a hypocrite,
 pretending to be pious but living a double life;
 in spite of all these things and anything else you think could disqualify you,
 God will never stop loving you,
 and His love for you will never fail.

This is love: Not that you loved God, but that God loved YOU, and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for YOUR sins. Accept the gospel truth of His love for you. Personally. Believe it with all your heart. Let His love for you free you from all the chains and ghosts of the past.

SET FREE TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER

Let God's love for you also set you free to love others as He loves you. In gratitude for His redeeming love, as a response to God for the gift of His love for you, love one another in the fellowship of the church and in all your networks of relationships with His kind of love.

Love one another deeply, from the heart (1 Peter 1:22).
 Bear with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2).
 Serve one another in love (Galatians 5:13).
 Let no debt remain outstanding,
 except the continuing debt to love one another (Romans 13:8).
 Be imitators of God, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love,
 just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us
 as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:1-2).

Now that you know these things, Jesus said,
 you will be blessed if you do them (John 13:17).

Now is the time.

THE POWER OF LOVE

I have to tell you this story, and then I'm done. Donald Miller tells in his book *Searching for God Knows What* about a friend whose marriage was falling apart, his whole life was falling apart, in fact, because of his alcoholism. Miller describes him as "a kind and brilliant human being, touched with many gifts from God, but addicted to alcohol, and (he was) being taken down in the fight." Miller spent hours talking with him, and confesses he didn't think his friend was going to make it. But his friend checked himself into rehab.

When Miller, who lives in a different city, saw him again two months later, his friend having gone several weeks without a drink, his friend told him about a single incident that was giving him the strength to continue in the painful recovery process. This man's father had flown in from another city to attend a recovery meeting with him, a meeting in which Miller's friend had to confess all his issues and weaknesses. When he finished, his father stood up to speak to this group of alcoholics. The father looked at his son and said: "I have never loved my son as much as I do at this moment. I love him. I want all of you to know I love him."

Miller's friend said at that moment, for the first time in his life, he was able to believe that God loved him, too. He believed that if his heavenly Father, his earthly father, and his wife all loved him, he could fight his addiction to alcohol. And he believed he might make it.

Isn't that the power of love? Isn't that the power of God's love for undeserving people like you and me? If we know that we are loved by God – and we are, and if we love one another as God Himself loves us, with God's kind of love, we demonstrate the wonder-working power of love, and we make God and His love visible to others.

May it be so in us and through us today and always, to the praise and glory of God. Amen.