

The Love of God Made Manifest

Introduction

The Season of Advent

- A. This is now the fourth and final week of Advent. I've been taking the themes associated with these four Sundays and considering them with you. This week's them, as you just heard, is love.
- B. And the text I'd like to now direct your attention to is [1 John 4:8b-11](#). While I'll not be going through it in quite so much detail as I would normally, it will still provide somewhat of a basis for my thinking and we shall be returning to it throughout the sermon.

The Text

^{8b}God is love. ⁹In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In 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. ¹¹Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ([1 John 4:8b-11](#))

Most Celebrated Yet Most Misunderstood

- A. I feel like there is probably no idea more celebrated in our culture than love.
- B. All you have to do is take a quick survey of our music and art and literature and you'll see it's this idea of love that all but permeates it all.
 - 1. I remember we were on a road trip as a family and I put some country music on the radio.
 - a. And, after a little while, finally my kids speak up: "Dad, why is every song on this station about love. All they talk about is girls? Yuck."
 - b. I said, "That's not true. They also talk about trucks and tractors and dirt and beer and, on occasion, Jesus, right?"
 - i. But, you know, they're right. At the end of the day, it's almost all about love.
 - 2. But, of course, this is not something unique to the country genre. You remember the Beatles—widely regarded as the most influential band of all time, pioneers in rock'n'roll and pop music—well, they would sing their message out to the thousands upon thousands who would flock to their concerts all around the world: "All you need is love. Love is all you need."
 - a. Sounds great, maybe warms the heart a bit, but what do they mean by that? To my knowledge they never defined this "love" for us.

3. All I need is love, but in the words of another song that was popular in the 90s: “What is love? Baby don’t hurt me. Don’t hurt me no more.”
 - a. At least this last guy’s honest. “I don’t really know what it is. Do you? Does anyone? I just keep getting hurt as I’m trying to find it.”
- C. You see, while, as I’ve said, there is probably no idea more celebrated in our culture than love, there is also probably no idea more misunderstood as well.
 1. There are so many different opinions about it, so many different definitions for it. And as we’ve gone about our way, of course we’ve tainted and contaminated and mixed up all our notions of it.
- D. I recently heard R.C. Sproul say: “I don’t think there is any word in the English language that’s been stripped of the depth of meaning such as [this] word ‘love.’”
 1. And he likened our dealings with it to the way a kid plays with a kaleidoscope.
 - a. You have those little colored stones at the end of the tumbler there and you look into the eye piece and it makes a pattern. Then you turn it a bit and it makes a completely new design and you couldn’t really get back to the first one even if you wanted to. It’s always changing.
 - i. Well, that’s, to some degree, our culture’s approach to love. We don’t exactly know what it is, we just know that we want it, and we’re always trying to find it. So we keep turning the tumbler and trying to make sense of it for ourselves.
- E. So this morning we’re going to take those same three questions I had asked a couple weeks ago of Peace, if you recall, and we’re now going to ask them of Love: (1) What Is It?; (2) Where Do We Find It?; and (3) How Does It Change Us (when we do)? So let’s go!

(1) What Is It?

In Our Culture

- A. So far as our culture is concerned, it seems to me that there are various lanes our definitions tend to track in in one way or another. We never really end up at a full understanding of it. Instead we have these personal emphases that then lead to a certain reduction in our perception of love.

1. I’ll share with you what I would consider to be three of the most common . . .

Emphasis #1: Affection

- A. Here’s where we think of love as something emotional—a warmth of heart in some sense.

1. Love is looking into the eyes of your bride and in a rush of excitement saying “I do.”

2. Love is looking in at the crib where your newborn child lay sleeping, fresh home from the hospital—it's the tears that well up in in those moments.
 3. Love is the anticipation you experience as you unwrap your In 'n Out burger and prepare for that first bite. "I love In 'n Out. Animal style burger. Side of fries. Strawberry-Vanilla shake. Gosh, I'm glad I live in California." But seriously, though, we use the word that casually sometimes.
- B. But in all these instances we're thinking of love as something that exists within the realm of our emotions. It's something that we feel. It's something that we get swept up in. It's something that happens to us. We can't necessarily control it.
1. Hence, we fall in and we fall out of love. I'm sorry, "I don't love you anymore." Oh, okay. We say it like there's nothing we can do about it. We're just victims of it.
- C. But it's this view of love that emphasizes our affections, how we feel about a person or an object. I love it now, it brings me joy, it excites me, it pleases me, but how long will I love it? I don't know.
1. Give me In 'n Out for dinner for a week straight and I'm pretty sure I'd hate the things. I can't stand it. "Get that grease out of my face. I'm going to go get a salad."

Emphasis #2: Action

- A. Perhaps in reaction against the first emphasis, some like to think of it less in terms of feeling and more in terms of activity. "Who cares what you feel. I don't want to hear about it anymore. Talk is cheap. Do love. Be loving. Act on it." Love is a verb.
1. John Mayer turned that little phrase into a song: "I don't need your words . . . / Love is a verb / You gotta show, show, show me / Love is a verb."
- B. It's one thing to say you love your spouse or your kids or your friends. It's another thing to show them that you love them in the way that you treat them.

Emphasis #3: Allegiance

- A. Related to this, but worthy of its own reflection here, is this emphasis on love as allegiance. It's the idea of loyalty, sticking with a person, being on their side, that sort of thing.
1. You might think here of the woman who has been through so much with her relationships in the past, she doesn't so much care anymore about what her man feels or does in the day to day. She just wants to know: Is he there? Will he be loyal? Will he stay with me? Or will he just bail out like the rest?
- B. But, of course, there's something else I had on my mind at this point, that I think is playing out quite prominently in the culture around us these days.
1. One of the ways this love as allegiance idea gets distorted is we think it means you better unconditionally approve of me, agree with me, toe the line for me . . . or you don't love me.

2. If you call me out or keep me from what I want, if you don't affirm me unequivocally, if you don't accept me uncritically, if you disagree with me or have another opinion on the matter, we see it as breaking allegiance . . . you don't really love me.
3. We draw the line in the sand, and you have to choose which side your on. It's a polarizing world right now, a world of black and white, with little room for gray.
 - a. So, for example, if I say I think that on the authority of the Bible marriage is meant by God to be between a man a woman and it's wrong for you to engage in that kind of behavior and it will ultimately be bad for you in the end, the conclusion is drawn that I don't love you.
 - i. "You're just like all the other Christians who hate the LGBTQ community." Why? Because I'm not indiscriminately affirming. Because I'm not, at least in their eyes, allegiant, or loyal. "You're not on our team. You must be against me."

C. Any parent in this room understands this dynamic.

1. Who hasn't told their kid no at one point or another and had them retort back: "You don't love me!"
 - a. "That's why you won't let me have screen time all day and eat ice cream for breakfast, lunch, and dinner."
 - b. I don't love you? It's the opposite, man.
 - i. But that's what this distorted understanding of love as allegiance can lead to.

D. So there you have it. Some emphasize love as affection, others as action, and still others as allegiance.

1. But what does the Bible say? What does God say? Can't we stop turning the kaleidoscope and at last get a bit more clarity on the matter!

In the Bible

A. Well, I imagine it's clear, the Bible is not necessarily at odds with any of these emphases when properly understood.

1. Our tendency though is going to be to reduce our understanding of love in one way or another, and hence we end up distorting it.
2. But the Bible is going to say: listen, love is not one of these things or the other, it's all of these things and more. Let me show you what I mean . . .

All of These Things

A. Certainly God says that love involves the affections, the heart of a person.

1. This is clear implication of Paul's opening words in [1 Cor. 13](#), the "love chapter" as it's been called: "¹ If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing" (vv. 1–3).
 - a. Did you hear that? Clearly love cannot be reduced to mere action without affection in some sense. For here, the actions are all being performed, and yet, somehow, love is still absent.
 - i. Love is the underlying motive of the heart, it's something that drives the action. And if it's not there on the inside, no matter what we do on the outside, it doesn't matter. It's not love.
- B. But, of course, love is not just affection and good intentions. It certainly does involve action. So Paul continues on in that chapter, to say that love is, among other things: "⁴ . . . [patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; \(1 Cor. 13:4–5\).](#)
 1. All of these descriptions here presuppose and demand even a certain level of activity. I can see love working out in your behavior towards me and others.
 - a. As the Apostle John says earlier in [1 John 3:18](#): "[Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.](#)"
 - i. So love is not just affection. It's also action.
- C. But Paul still will not let us stop there. Love is allegiance as well. It's affection and action played out over the long haul.
 1. So he goes on: "[Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things](#)" ([1 Cor. 13:7](#)).
 - a. In other words, love doesn't just bail when the going gets tough. It's still there when the dust of conflict and controversy settles. Love, as understood by the Bible, entails allegiance, ongoing commitment, loyalty.
 2. And wonderfully, in pushback against the distorted idea of allegiance as uncritical acceptance or unconditional approval, he says right before in [v. 6](#) that love "[does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.](#)"
 - a. If you truly love someone, you will at times call out their wrongdoing and attempt to lead them towards the truth which will lead to life, however they may feel about it in the moment.
 - i. As Paul puts it in [Eph. 4:15](#): we are to "[\[speak\] the truth in love.](#)"

And More

- A. But, of course, I said the Bible's presentation of love includes all of these things . . . and more. So what's this "more" I'm talking about?
- B. Well, it's what John points us to back in the first verse of our text.
1. You see, love, according to the Bible, is not first an idea, nor is it first affection, or action, or allegiance, or any of these things.
 2. No, in the Scriptures, we see that love is first and foremost . . . a person.
 - a. Or to put it in the words of [1 John 4:8b](#): "God is love."
- C. Think about that for a moment.
1. John is saying that love is not something which God merely feels, nor something which he merely acts on, nor something which he merely commits to over the long haul.
 2. No. Fundamentally, love is something that he is. It's essential to his very being.
- D. And as such, it must be said, and should be expected, that we cannot properly understand nor experience love apart from this God who himself is love. Whatever love is, it has its origin in him. All of our efforts to find it outside of him are doomed to fail.
1. It's like the woman who would like to think she could keep a cut flower in her vase on the table for months on end.
 2. No. The moment you cut the flower from its root, you doom it to certain death in just a short bit of time. The petals begin to wilt and drop, no matter how much water you put it in. You cut it from its life source. It can't thrive. It won't last.
 - a. More on that in a moment.
- E. For now, let us consider further the meaning of these words of John: "God is love."
1. I was talking with Joey about these things over lunch, and he reminded me that any proper understanding of this idea that "God is love" must necessarily begin with reference to the relationship of love that has existed within the Trinity—between the Father, Son, and Spirit—from all eternity.
- F. This is a point made so eloquently by C.S. Lewis in a quote I've read to you before from his well-known and much-loved book *Mere Christianity*. In it, he's reflecting on this very statement of John, and he writes this: "All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that 'God is love'. But they seem not to notice that the words 'God is love' have no real meaning unless God contains at least two Persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love. Of course, what these people mean when they say that God is love is often something quite different: they really mean 'Love is God'. They really mean that our feelings of love, however and wherever they arise, and whatever results they produce, are to be treated with great respect. Perhaps they are: but that is something quite different from what Christians mean by the statement 'God is love'. They believe

that the living, dynamic activity of love has been going on in God forever and has created everything else.

And that, by the way, is perhaps the most important difference between Christianity and all other religions: that in Christianity God is not a static thing . . . but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance” (174-75).

1. Isn't that beautiful? The Father, Son, and Spirit, depicted here as if in some sort of dance of love from all eternity.
 - a. Lewis is getting at the sort of thing Jesus himself actually refers to in places like [John 17:24](#), where he's praying, and he says: “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”
 - i. Before the world ever was, there was love between the Father and Son, within the Godhead himself.
- G. And it's actually, therefore, as Lewis mentions, in the overflow of this love that God creates the world in the first place.
 1. [Gen. 1](#) has this loving dance as it's backdrop, as it's wellspring, as its fountainhead. It's as if all of creation is erupting out from this vesuvian love.
 - a. That's why the world came to be. That's why you and I are here. That's why the Scriptures present God as rejoicing over, delighting in all he has made: “[And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good](#)” ([Gen. 1:31](#)).
 - i. You and I were created from the love of God for the love of God.
- H. As a quick side note, why do you think God, when trying to image himself in our humanity, saw fit that we would create new human beings, babies, not through some boring, drab scientific or mathematic process, but in the wonderful, ecstatic, joyful, loving, erupting pleasure of sexual intercourse between husband and wife—where two become one flesh? We are to, like God, create in the context of love.
 1. How far we've come from such an ideal! How terribly we've twisted sex in our culture to something animal, to something of the appetite, to something that's just about me getting what I want.
 - a. But nevertheless, God's design and intent for it remains remarkable.
- I. And I suppose this leads to the last thing I'd want to bring out on this: namely, God's love is so different from our reduced and distorted versions of it.
 1. So often you and I love from deficiency, from a place of need. We love those whom we think will serve or satisfy us in some way. It's self-serving in the end.

2. But God's love, as we see here, is not from deficiency, it's from abundance. He already has love. He doesn't create us because he needs love. He creates us because he is love. The love of God is not self-serving, but self-giving.

- a. It's this overflowing love of God that gives way not just to creation but to Christmas.

J. And this now sets up our second question . . .

(2) Where Do We Find It?

Revisiting Lewis

- A. Well, I'll tell you, as it's hopefully clear by now: we find by coming into relationship with God.
- B. But I want to flesh this out further for us at this point by picking back up where we left off with C.S. Lewis. After talking about this loving dance of the Trinity, he goes on to write: "And now, what does it all matter? It matters more than anything else in the world. The whole dance, or drama, or pattern of this three-Personal life is to be played out in each one of us: or (putting it the other way around) each one of us has got to enter that pattern, take his place in that dance. There is no other way to the happiness for which we were made. . . . If you want to get warm you must stand near the fire: if you want to be wet you must get into the water. If you want joy, power, peace, eternal life, you must get close to, or even into, the thing that has them. They are not a sort of prize which God could, if He chose, just hand out to anyone. They are a great fountain of energy and beauty spurting up at the very centre of reality. If you are close to it, the spray will wet you: if you are not, you will remain dry. Once a man is united to God, how could he not live forever? Once a man is separated from God, what can he do but wither and die? But how is he to be united to God? How is it possible for us to be taken into the three-Personal life?" (176-77).
 1. How do we come into this God who is love and thereby find the love of God for us? That is the question Lewis is posing. And there is no more important question in all the universe that we could ask.

The Love of God Finds Us!

- A. Well, at this point we shall take Lewis' question, but leave him behind in favor of our text back in John. For there the answer is most plainly given to us.
 1. And what we see is that we don't so much go off to find this love of God ourselves.
 2. No. The love of God has come down to find us. And his name is Jesus.
- B. Look at [1 John 4:9](#): "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him."
 1. Jesus is the love of God made manifest.
 2. Christmas is the God who is love breaking into human history, breaking into humanity itself, that he might manifest that love to us, that he might invite us into the dance if you will.

- a. Nobody wants to be that high school kid who didn't get asked to the dance, right? All your friends are going, they're getting all dressed up, excited, but no one asked you.
 - i. Listen, Jesus is asking you. Jesus is inviting you. Not just to some silly homecoming thing. He's inviting you into the dance of love that's been going on from eternity between him, the Father, and the Spirit. He's inviting you into the dance of love that you've been created for, that you've been looking for.
- C. And this is what we see all throughout Jesus' earthly life is it not? All these various dimensions we've looked at to this point, are wrapped up wholly and perfectly in him.
 - 1. Here is where the kaleidoscope becomes the telescope, as it were, and something that once seemed so distant and far off is brought near and made crystal clear.

The Affection of Christ

- A. Jesus has affection for us unlike any other.
- B. So Matthew says that when he went about from town to town: *"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36).*
 - 1. Do you realize he looks at you in this same way? In your struggles. In your sorrows. In your sins. He doesn't condemn you. He has compassion on you. He feels for you. His heart wells up with affection for you.
- C. I thought also of that famous scene where we're told that he weeps outside of Lazarus' tomb, when he thinks upon the death of his friend and sees all the pain that this death has caused these others that he cares for: *"[H]e was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled,"* John tells us. And *"Jesus wept" (John 11:33, 35).*
 - 1. And all the Jews standing alongside, witnessing the sorrow and the tears of our Savior, say amongst themselves: *"See how he loved him!" (John 11:36).*

The Action of Christ

- A. But, you know, he doesn't just feel for us, he does something about it. His love is not just mere affection. It's also action.
- B. So in Matthew, when he saw us as sheep without a shepherd, what does he do? He comes into shepherd, to care, to help. He moves toward the broken and the needy.
 - 1. In *Matt. 9:53* we read: *"Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction."*
- C. And what about Lazarus? Does he stop at offering up a few tears of condolence?

1. No! He raises that man from the dead—“Lazarus, come out!” (John 11:43). And he turns all of their sorrow to joy.
- D. His love is not hollow, it’s not empty promise, it’s not mere emotion. It’s not just “in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

The Allegiance of Christ

- A. And of course this love of his is not just of affection or action, it’s also of allegiance. It’s a faithful love, a loyal love. It’s a love to the end.
1. So in John 13:1 we read: “Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”
 - a. Think about that. Jesus is not going to let you go! His love isn’t fickle. He’s not a fair-weather fan. He will love you to the bitter end!
- B. You know where he goes, don’t you, after raising Lazarus there in Bethany? Ultimately, he ends up in Jerusalem where he’ll soon be set in his own tomb.
1. This great act of love in Bethany set in motion the wheels that would turn to his own undoing.
 2. His friend’s resurrection would lead to his own crucifixion.
 3. The Jewish leaders, filled with jealousy and rage, we’re told, “from that day on they made plans to put him to death” (John 11:53).
 - a. And he knew it. But it didn’t stop him. This is why he’d come. Christmas is for the cross.

The Cross of Christ

- A. So back in our text 1 John 4, John continues in v. 10: “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.”
1. Here we come in earnest to the answer of Lewis’ question: If we find the love we long for ultimately by being united to the God who himself is love, how do we do it, how do we get into the dance?
 - a. John gives us the answer here in both negative and positive formulations.

Negatively: Not My Love for Him

- A. Negatively, we see, we don’t get into the dance by cleaning ourselves up.
1. That’s what we tend to think. The girl who is desperate for a boy to invite her to the prom, she determines to do whatever she can to get one to notice her. She’s got to get pretty, wear that makeup, she’s got to be cool, hang out with the right crew, all of that.

2. But that's not how this works with Jesus.
- B. That's what John is getting at when he says there: "In this is love, not that we have loved God . . ."
1. He goes out of his way to emphasize the fact that we don't get into the dance by first pursuing him or pleasing him or loving him. It doesn't begin with us.
 - a. We didn't love God. We loved the darkness. But he loved us anyways.
- C. You know that's the flow of thought in the context of [John 3:16](#).
1. Everyone knows [John 3:16](#), it says: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son . . ."
 2. But do you know what it says down in v. 19? "[T]he light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light . . ."
- a. He loves us. We love the darkness.
- D. It's as the great reformer Martin Luther once said (my old church history professor Carl Trueman considers this to be the most beautiful statement to ever come from his pen): "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it."
1. Do you get what he is saying there?
 - a. God doesn't love you because you are loveable. He loves you so that you might become loveable.
 - b. He doesn't invite you to the dance because you are beautiful. He invites you to the dance so that he can make you beautiful.
 - i. He loves you back to life.
 - ii. But how does he do it? By giving himself up to death.

Positively: His Love for Me

- A. That's the positive formulation that John goes on to give us: "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."
- B. God is rightly angry at humanity for their spurning of him, for their rebellion, for their sin. He is not merely loving—he is also holy and pure and just.
1. How are you going to invite and welcome sinners into the loving dance of the triune God? We don't deserve to be there.
- C. I'll tell you how he's going to do it. The Father's going to send his Son home, he's going to boot his Son from the ball, as it were, so that you and I can be brought in.
1. That's what's happening on the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ([Matt. 27:46](#)). He's being kicked out of the dance—the dance of love he's enjoyed with his Father from all eternity. And he's going through that for us.

D. Jesus is “the propitiation for our sins,” John says.

1. He’s the sin-bearing, wrath-appeasing sacrifice. He’s the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.
 - a. Forsaken so that we could be accepted.
 - b. Wounded so that we could be healed.
 - c. Crushed so that we could be built up.
 - d. Killed so that we could be reborn.
 - e. Hated so that we could be loved.

E. It’s amazing, because, you know, the cross brings together those two poles that our culture can’t seem to.

1. The cross of Christ is at one and the same time the greatest rebuke humanity could ever receive and the greatest gift.
2. At the cross God calls us out without condemning us.
3. He addresses our sin without undressing our shame.
4. He exposes how wrong we’ve been at the very same moment he is making a way for us to get right.
5. He is simultaneously slamming the door on our self-adoring self-righteousness and opening the door to the innermost chambers of his heart.
 - a. Only the cross can rebuke you while it receives you, slap you while it saves you, convict you while it covers you.
 - i. And that’s true love. It’s love in truth.

F. And this leads the last question . . .

(3) How Does It Change Us?

A. Because, listen, when you receive that love, when you embrace that love, when you repent of your sin and your rebellion and you take Jesus’ hand and let him lead you into the dance, it changes you.

1. How?
 - a. Well, in so many ways.
 - b. But we’ll just go where John goes next in our text: “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11). Those who have been so loved, will in a similar manner, start to love others.
 - i. As John says similarly a few verses later: “We love because he first loved us” (v. 19).

- B. We said a while back, that God's love is so different than man's—ours is from need his is from abundance, ours is self-serving, his self-giving.
 - 1. Well, when he brings you into that dance, you now have the resources in him to love not like the rest of the world, but like he does. Because you don't have the need in the same way for a person to fill you. You have him. You don't have to worry so much about what you get or how you're served in the relationship, he's serving you. He's got you. You can go serve them.
 - a. We draw now from the deep wellspring of his love and forgiveness for us and from that have resources in the Spirit to give the same to others.
- C. We can have a love that's now marked by affection, action, and allegiance, no doubt. But it's a love that's ultimately drawn from and leads back to the person of Jesus, to the God who is love.