

## **Commitment: Are You All In?**

### **Real Love**

#### **1 John 4:7-19**

**4/2/17**

- As a child, and even now as an adult, I like stories of chivalry and bravery. As a kid, my brothers and I were drawn to stories and movies which featured brave knights, fair damsels, and deeds of courage and honor.
  - o There was a story that I heard that recounts the adventures of George, a Christian martyr and patron saint of England. According to the legend, George slew a dragon that had been terrorizing the countryside. Though others had tried and failed, only George was successful.
  - o What made him successful? He was pure in heart, he had a pure love in his heart to help the people of his country. His heart was so pure and so full of love that he was committed to sacrifice even his own life. Because of that pure, love-filled heart, he was then able to approach the dragon without fear.
  
- I think there is a dragon for the church, and by church, I mean the church universal – all who call themselves “Christian.” And, it’s going to take some real bravery to overcome this dragon.
  - o The dragon is fear. This dragon keeps us from really loving people. Because of this dragon, real love is hard to find, even in the church, even among Christians who are supposed to be all about love.
  - o Now, we would probably all agree that love is key to who we should be as Christians, right? After all, what is the greatest commandment? And, what is the 2<sup>nd</sup> greatest commandment? Jesus even said that all the law could be summed up in one – Love your neighbor. Can we all agree to this?
  - o We know that is Scripture and that is what we should be living by.
  
- Yet, if we look at how we have actually done that or failed to do it, we see that “love” has been twisted and carried out in a way that isn’t all that loving at all. And, I believe that is why the church is in decline. We have been failing to share real love.
  - o Let me give you some examples. For some here, you remember the “old days” when you were expected to sit in church and be quiet or you were gonna get it. I heard from someone just last week that in a church they grew up in (I won’t say which one), that the ushers would stand at the sides, looking for people doing what they shouldn’t be doing, like chewing gum, talking, etc. Goodness sakes!
  
- I came across another story during my research this week about a little boy in church with his mother. He was a good little boy, quiet & well behaved. He didn’t cause any problems. But every once in a while, he would sit up on his knees in the pew, turn around, look at the people behind him & smile at them. His smile was infectious, and soon everybody behind

him was starting to smile back at him, too. It was all going fine until the mother realized what the little boy was doing. When she did, she grabbed him by his ear and twisted it a bit, told him to sit down and remember that he was in church. Then he started sniffing and crying, so she turned to him and said, "That's better."

- It's sad, isn't it, that many people have the impression that when we come to church that it is all gloom and doom and joyless? This place should be one of the most exciting places in the whole community because love is here! Acceptance is here! Joy is here! God is here!
  - But, the dragon of fear has spewed out fiery lies about how appearances and rules are more important than love. And, we wonder why we are losing our younger generations. That dragon is killing the church as we talk about love, but don't really love. We cannot be a church like that.
- For the past two months, we have been talking about commitment and if you are all in. Are you all in with your family, with your marriage, are you all in with your commitment to God? Those are all things we have been evaluating our commitments toward.
- This morning, we are going to conclude our Commitment series to ask "Are you all in to really love people? Do you commit to be a person of real love?"
  - I think most of us would say, "Of course." Most people like love, right? Most people want to be loving people, kind people. There is a whole movement about how kindness matters. Ellen DeGeneres ends every one of her talk shows with "Be kind to one another." Isn't that nice? Isn't that loving? To some extent.
- Yet, kindness is different than real love. Talking about love is different than real love. Real love takes us to a different level than smiling at folks and having manners. Real love takes us to a different level than having loving feelings about people or believing that love is important to us as Christians. Real love moves beyond that.
- How many of us think every day, "How can I really love my neighbor today? If that's the 2<sup>nd</sup> greatest commandment, how can I do that?" How many of us think every day, "How can I share Jesus with someone today? How can I really love my neighbor today?"
  - Now, if we don't, is it safe to say that maybe love isn't as important as we want it to be? Of course, there are a plethora of reasons for not asking those questions of ourselves each day.
  - We can say that we don't have "time." But, is that really it? The honest fact is that we make time to do what is important to us. If we are all in to something, somehow we find or make the time.
  - Based on how we live, are we all in, committed to expressing real love? Or, do we have a dragon that we need to deal with so that we can really love? Do we even know what real love is? After all, we have been living in this society for so long where the meaning of love has been twisted and mangled that maybe we don't have a good basic understanding about what real love is.

- Let's turn together to the book of 1 John to give us some answers about real love. We are going to look at chapter 4. John, in his letter, describes how God is light, how God is life and then he takes two chapters of this five chapter book to share about God's real love. It must be pretty important.
  - o We're going to read a whole section of Scripture and then break it down for us. Let's read **1 John 4:7-19**.
  
- Here, John is telling us all about real love. Not our definition. Not the world's definition. Not Hollywood's definition. Not our experience of love. But, real love. Let's break it down to see if we are a people and a church who possess and are committed to real love by looking at the attributes of real love.
  
- First, we read in verses 7-8 that real love only comes from God. Real love can only come from God because only God is love. He is the source of love. Without God, we would have no clue what love really is.
  - o That's why so many people are still trying to figure out what love is. Listen to popular songs throughout the decades. Song writers have been trying to figure out love. Love has been called an emotion, a feeling, a flaw of the human heart, even a curse.
  - o But, what we learned a few weeks ago, is that love, real love, the real love that comes from God is agape love. It is an unconditional, sacrificial choice to put someone above yourself. That is love. That is God's love
  
- I want us to note that it doesn't just say that God loves. Of course, he does. But, it's more than just God loving.
  - o God is love. His very nature is love. His very nature is unconditional, sacrificial love. His very nature is to choose to love even when we don't deserve his love at all. We have the capacity to love only because God is love and we are created in his image.
  - o Even though we were created in the image of God with the capacity to love, we can't really know what self-sacrificing love is until we first receive it. You must lay open your whole heart to the free acceptance of the love with which He first loved you.
  - o Then once you know, believe and accept the love with which God first loved you, there will spring up God's love in you. This love from God is what enables you to love others.
  
- Until you know this God love, you don't have the ability to love with a real love. Our love is always incomplete, self-serving, self-focused and manipulative because of our human nature. We must have the nature of God in us through knowing God, being in relationship with God, being transformed into a new creation and more and more like Jesus, before we can love anyone, including ourselves, with a real love.
  - o There is such a buzz today about how you have to love yourself before you can love anyone else. Depression and self-esteem issues and being in toxic, unhealthy relationships all point to not loving yourself.

- Do you want to know how to love yourself – tap into God’s love for you. Receive God’s love, the God who is love, and receive the truth of the depth of his love for you. Stand on the truth of who you are to God and how much he loves you. And tell the liar, the deceiver, who is filling your head with how worthless you are that he is the one who is the loser – you are a child of the King, highly favored and loved with an everlasting love that was willing to pay for you with his very life.
- Once you have tapped into the truth that God is love and you know God, then his love takes action in you. This is the next attribute of real love. Real love responds by loving others.
  - Most of 1 John tells us this. In this passage, specifically verses 7 and 19 command us to love others and each other. We much love others around us and we must love each other in the church.
  - Which one is harder to do? To love people who don’t know God or to love people to do know God? Well...maybe it’s a toss up! Regardless, we can’t love anybody if we don’t know God.
- I hope we are beginning to see the active nature of love. The songs might say that love is a feeling. But, God says, “Love is action.” Once we accept his love and know his love the very first thing we are to do is to then love others. God gives us the divine ability to love with a kind of love that is from God’s own nature. We are to share his love that has been planted and is growing in us with others.
  - If we are not actively loving other people, it says we don’t really know God. You cannot be a Christ follower, being transformed to be less like you and more like him and yet you just don’t like other people. It’s impossible!!
  - I don’t care if you are an introverted or extroverted personality. The capacity to actively love other people has nothing to do with your personality. It has everything to do with God. If you really know God, you might be shy and quiet, but you will still love people. If you really know God, you might be the life of the party, but you know that there is more than the party, you have to really love people.
  - My father is a natural introvert. When he first felt to call to ministry, he thought God must surely be joking. How could God use someone who doesn’t like to talk in front of people and can be uncomfortable around people? God can use him and God can use anyone as God’s real love permeates us. Then, we are compelled to love others, not just by word, but by deed.
- If, as Christians, we don’t love people, 1 Corinthians says we are nothing! 1 John says we don’t really know God. Do you really know God this morning? If so, you can tell it by your love for people!
  - Tomas A. Kempis said “Whoever loves much, does much.” John tells us in this passage what the “much” is. Let’s see the next real love action is...

- Verses 9-10 tells us that real love is willing to be sent. What brought you into a relationship with Jesus? It was his love. We aren't drawn through guilt, pressure or fear. If so, we don't really know God. We are drawn by love. Jesus loves us, so he came for us.
  - In his book *Jesus Among Other Gods*, Ravi Zacharias tells a story about a girl who became hopelessly lost in a dark and dense forest. She called and screamed, but to no avail. Her alarmed parents and a group of volunteers searched frantically for her. When darkness fell, they had to give up for the night.
  - Early the next morning the girl's father reentered the forest to search for her and spied her fast asleep on a rock. He called her name and ran toward her. Startled awake, she threw her arms out to him. As he picked her up and hugged her, she repeated over and over, "Daddy, I found you!"
  - Now, we know that little girl didn't find her father. Yet, sometimes, we who believe speak of finding God. The truth is, we didn't find God. He had been seeking us the whole time! He sent his Son for us, he relentlessly pursued us. He was just waiting for us to realize our lostness and finally reach out to him!
  
- Just as Jesus' love compelled him to go and be sent by the Father to earth, God's love in us compels us to be sent to where lost people are and to seek redemption where there is injustice.
  - As many of you know, we have been doing this book study with people from the Church of the Ascension. We have been reading the book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* together and talking about the history of the lynching era in the US and how it can help move us toward racial reconciliation. Tonight will be our last discussion. It has been an interesting and growing time together.
  - Racial reconciliation is a hot topic. The Church of God has been talking about how to better facilitate racial reconciliation in our movement. I'm involved in Christian Woman Connection, which is the women's ministry for the Church of God, and a big part of our strategic planning for the ministry is to address racial reconciliation and how to better facilitate that.
  - Our country is talking about it – at some level. How can we be unified? Can we pass laws? Can we put law enforcement officials through diversity training? Can we demand the use of diversity curriculum in our schools? What can we do?
  
- One of the statements made to me by a couple of the members of the Church of the Ascension is "We want to learn from you all about how to be more multicultural. We are jealous of what you have and what to know your church's secret."
  - It seems to me that people are looking for some simple thing to do – some secret thing that if they just do, they will enjoy racial reconciliation. The key, though, is doing something that's not simple and that really isn't a secret.
  - It is doing something beyond talking about the need for reconciliation. Talking is all find and good as a first step, but it isn't what is going to be what brings people together.
  - It is doing something beyond passing legislation or laws by the government. It is doing something beyond different training or mission statements or by-laws in

agencies. It is doing something beyond teaching a diverse curriculum in our schools. All of those things are helpful and often very necessary, but they aren't enough.

- What has to happen is that we accept the sending call of Jesus Christ. That we are willing to be sent, in love, just as he was willing to be sent to humanity by God in order that humanity might be reconciled in a relationship with God. Reconciliation never, never, never will happen without being willing to be sent and to enter in relationship.
  - o Our church has no secret. Rev. Mars, years ago, accepted the call to be sent to the community – the whole community – and he built relationships with people, he accepted people and it didn't matter what race they were. I just bet he was pretty intentional to be sent to white folks in this community. Because if he wouldn't have been, what we have now wouldn't have even started.
  - o Through the years, others have done the same. And, we have made a commitment to continue to do the same.
  
- We have to be willing to be sent. And, that doesn't just apply to if we want to remain multicultural, that applies to if we want to remain in existence. Because here's the hard truth, if we are not willing to be sent, like Christ was sent, to love people and to be in relationship with people so that we can point them to an ultimate relationship with God, we will cease to exist as a church.
  - o That doesn't mean that it's easy. Real love is anything but easy. Fake is easy. Real isn't easy. It isn't easy to be sent. It's risky. It's hard work. It takes much from us. It requires much from us. We have to get uncomfortable.
  - o It's when we get off our knees or off our seats and start using our feet. That's what Jesus did. He went off and prayed and then was empowered to go to those he was sent by the Father to save and minister to.
  - o As we said before, God's love is not passive. God's love is a love of action!
  
- The next action of real love is that it is brought to full expression. Verses 11-16a tell us that God's love must be brought to full expression in us and through us. Again, action. What does that look like?
  - o Verse 13 says that It looks like the Spirit of God is living in us. The Spirit of God is speaking to us and guiding us to acts of love.
  - o It's that voice that says to you, "Talk to that person." "Stop and see if that person needs a ride or needs help." Have you ever had that happen? You see someone and for some reason, you hear this voice in your head telling you to do something. So often, we probably shrug it off and think "I don't even know that person!" Those are Holy Spirit instances!
  
- And, when we actually listen to the Spirit in us, we can express God's love. Last year, when Josiah started kindergarten, I noticed a man walking a little boy to school every day. Then, in the afternoon, he and the little boy stayed to play on the playground as I do with Josiah. I kept feeling compelled to talk to this man.

- One day, it was pouring in the morning and I felt so bad as I drove by and there they were walking. I felt like I should offer them a ride. I didn't. It was pouring in the afternoon. Again, I didn't say anything. After all, what would it look like for me to ask a man that I didn't know if they wanted a ride.
  - But, this conversation between me and the Holy Spirit just wouldn't stop. He kept prompting me to say something to this man. Finally, I talked to him on the playground after school one day. The Holy Spirit was prompting Wil to do the same and to offer the man a ride home after school. Over the last year and a half, we have built a friendship with that man and his family.
  - He and his wife are raising their grandson after their son died. This man has all kinds of questions about God and why he could allow certain things to happen. He is questioning God and wanting to be angry with God, but God is pursuing him and he put Wil and I in his life to be God's love for him.
- Because, over the course of conversations, Wil and I have done the next action step in fully expressing God love. We confess that Jesus is Lord. Verses 14 & 15 tell us when God's love is in us and we live for God, we confess that Jesus is Lord.
    - That means, we don't have an undercover faith. We don't have a secret faith so that people don't know if we are believers or not. At the same time, we don't have an annoying faith where we are saying "praise the Lord" after every sentence as a way to show people we are Christians.
    - Instead, we just love people with real God love and they see it. Then, they ask us about what they see and we can tell them we are the way we are because of Jesus.
- If we fail to confess that Jesus is Lord, we fail to really love people. Too often, we talk about everything else and rest our laurels on everything else rather than following in Jesus' example to love.
    - Let me give you an example. There is no better example of a church rich in history and tradition than Westminster Abbey. One day a tour group was being shown the Abbey. They were shown all the symbols of Britain's history. They saw the place where the monarchs are crowned. They visited the tombs and the memorials to the nation's greatest. It was a wonderful trip backwards in time and rich legacy.
    - But then one member of the tour group asked the guide a searching question. She said, "Sir, this is all very fine, but has anybody been saved here lately?"
    - See, the Abbey is beautiful and all that, but it has ceased to do what God's design was for it.
    - God's design for your life and his love in you is that people come to know Jesus as Lord. Has anyone been saved because of your love and your confession of him as Lord?
- The next full expression of God's love can be found in verse 16a - we trust God's love. Our relationship with Jesus all revolves around our level of trust. Your expression of love for God and others all revolves around your level of trust in God.

- This morning, I want us to consider two scenarios to help illustrate trust. Imagine for a moment you are on a cruise. You're enjoying life and a great vacation. But, the cruise ship hits something and begins to sink.
  - While everyone is heading to the life rafts, you grab a bottle of water and a bag of trail mix in your pocket and head to the life rafts. Nobody else knows you have these things. So there you are in the life rafts, with some other folks, the ship has sunk and you are bobbing around in the open sea.
  - Eventually you spot an island and start heading toward it. As you get closer you see the island is very barren. No green plants, no sign of drinkable water, just very rocky. As you continue to row toward the island, another on the boat says, "Boy, I sure am thirsty."
  - What do you do?
  
- Now, let me change things a little. Imagine the same scenario with your ship sinking and you having some water and trail mix and you spot an island. But as you get closer to this island, it appears lush and well-watered with trees producing fruit. Maybe you even see a waterfall in the distance. It is a veritable tropical paradise. And as you row toward the island, a person on the boat says, "Boy, I sure am thirsty."
  - Does what you do change from the first scenario? If there is a difference between how you would respond, my question is why? You are the same person in each scenario. You aren't any more or less moral or ethical of a person. What is the change that has occurred?
  - The only change is what you see before you and what you see in second scenario incites trust that there are resources enough to spare in the second scenario.
  
- Listen, there is enough of God and God's love for you to spare putting yourself out there to love others. He can take care of you and he can take care of them. He can empower you. He can enable you. He can give you the words. He can give you all that you need and still have an infinite amount leftover.
  - If you don't trust God and his love, you will never share his love with anyone. If you completely trust him, you will find that you can express his love in ways that are far beyond you because God is limitless!
  
- And, trusting God because you know that he is limitless, we come to experience the next attribute of real love. Real love has no fear. Here we are back at the dragon of fear we talked about in the beginning. In verses 16-19, John specifically talks about two types of fear: fear of judgement and fear of punishment. But, real love expels our fear.
  - Here, John is talking about fear of standing before God in the day of judgement and if we abide in his love, we don't have to fear. And, he speaks of not having to fear punishment because we have experienced his perfect love.
  
- But, I want to talk about another kind fear of judgement and punishment. The kind that keep us from loving others enough to tell them about Jesus. Witnessing is a word that creates fear in most people. When I start talking about sharing Jesus with people, some



here may have begun to tune me out. When I start talking about inviting people to church, it makes people nervous, they don't want to hear about it. When I start talking about doing outreaches, people start thinking about a million other things they would rather do than do an outreach.

- Much of that is based on fear. We are afraid of people's judgement of us and we are afraid of punishment – not actual physical punishment, but relational punishment in the form of rejection.
  - Fear keeps us from begin all in. Fear keeps us from trusting. Fear keeps us from real love and really loving others.
  - Those fears keep us from really knowing God because if we don't love others, we don't know God or love God – those are God's word, not mine.
- Fear has paralyzed the church and people who claim to know God but instead really only truly know fear. Fear keeps us looking inward, rather than outward. Fear gives us a list of reasons for not speaking to others about Jesus and reasons to keep our "faith" quiet. How can faith be quiet?
- In addition to the fear of judgement and punishment, there is another fear that John doesn't list that is still very real and keeps us from real love. It is the fear of what we do being worthless. But, in God's real love, there is No fear of worthlessness.
  - The fear of worthlessness is the fear that says your active love for people won't really make a difference, so why try? Or, you've done it before, you put yourself out there and nothing happened. You tried and it lead to nothing.
  - It's the fear that I hear when people say, "I've invited people to church, but they never want come." Or, "I had a friend come once, but it didn't last."
  - The great Billy Sunday was once asked "Why do you keep having revivals when it doesn't last?" He asked back, "Why do you keep taking baths?"
- While we are in the movement of showing God's love, we may get to a point where we feel as if nothing is happening and like what we are doing is worthless. However, we must take note that in our demonstration of love God is glorified.
- John says that if we start down this path we are launching a movement that will ultimately advance something greater than ourselves.
  - The family that we met through Josiah's school, they haven't come to know Jesus and the man is still struggling with anger. Does it mean what we have said and our acts of love are worthless? No! It might take years and years – that's OK. We've got the time and God's got the love.
  - Do you know how many connections with people I have made over the years and how few have seemed to make any difference? I put myself and my faith out there all of the time. I can't help it – it's out there as soon as someone asks me where I work! Does it mean that what I do is worthless?
  - I bet that you have just as many connections and opportunities to share God's love and to confess Jesus as your Lord. What dragon keeps you from loving people enough to share God's love with them?

- God used many people so that we would see Him (parents, teachers, pastors, etc.) now we must turn and do the same. We must continue to show it to others no matter how long it takes, trusting that God is still in the loving and pursuing business and trusting that God can use us if we will give up our fear and take on his real love.
  
- Dr. E. Stanley Jones wrote, "I am inwardly fashioned for faith, not for fear. Fear is not my native land; faith is. I am so made that worry and anxiety are sand in the machinery of life; faith is the oil. I live better by faith and confidence than by fear, doubt and anxiety. In anxiety and worry, my being is gasping for breath--these are not my native air. But in faith and confidence, I breathe freely--these are my native air."
  - A John Hopkins University doctor says, "We do not know why it is that worriers die sooner than the non-worriers, but that is a fact." But I, who am simple of mind, think I know; We are inwardly constructed in nerve and tissue, brain cell and soul, for faith and not for fear. God made us that way. To live by worry is to live against reality."
  
- This morning, in this church, among this group of God's people – are we going to continue to allow the dragon of fear to keep us from experiencing God's real love for us and from expressing God's love for others? Is that what we want??
  - Rise up, Church of God and commit to be all in! Commit to be consumed by God's love! Commit to slaying the dragon of fear so that God's real love will win! Rise up and show each other love. Rise up and show our community love. Rise up and show our children love – real love!!