

May 30

Lesson 13

God Is Love

Focal Passage: 1 John 4:7-21

Background Text: Same

Purpose Statement: To embrace and celebrate God's all-encompassing love

1 John 4:7-21

⁷Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. ⁸The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. ¹⁰This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.

¹¹Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. ¹²No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us. ¹³This is how we know we remain in him and he remains in us, because he has given us a measure of his Spirit. ¹⁴We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the savior of the world. ¹⁵If any of us confess that Jesus is God's Son, God remains in us and we remain in God. ¹⁶We have known and have believed the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them. ¹⁷This is how love has been perfected in us, so that we can have confidence on the Judgment Day, because we are exactly the same as God is in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love. ¹⁹We love because God first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God" and hate their brothers or sisters are liars. After all, those who don't love their brothers or sisters whom they have seen can hardly love God whom they have not seen! ²¹This

commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.

Key Verse: "We have known and have believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them" (1 John 4:16).

We have come to the last of the five lessons in this unit about ways God has been revealed in the Bible and what we learn about God through these revelations. The message proclaimed in the text for this lesson is that "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

We first looked at the Lord's self-declaration to Moses: "The LORD! The LORD! a God who is compassionate and merciful, very patient, full of great loyalty and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6). God's compassion, mercy, patience, loyalty, and faithfulness are all expressions of God's love.

We then saw God's care for Elijah when he "sat down under a solitary broom bush" (1 Kings 19:4) and God's presence with him in the thin, quiet sound (1 Kings 19:12). God's care and presence are expressions of God's love.

God showed love for Peter, John, and James in allowing them to witness Jesus' transfiguration and assuring them of Jesus' identity and authority, saying, "This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him!" (Luke 9:35). The Book of Daniel shows that, even in the vivid and sometimes frightening imagery of apocalyptic visions, we see an expression of love as God assures us of the divine authority over all creation and the divine promise that God's goodness will triumph over all evil.

As we grow in our Christian faith, we become more aware and more accepting of God's love for us. As we study this text from 1 John together, let us embrace and celebrate God's all-encompassing love!

The CEB titles the Focal Passage for this lesson, 1 John 4:7-21, "Love and God." In this text, the author makes three key points about God's love and our relationship with God.

This Is How the Love of God Is Revealed to Us

The first key point in this text is that God revealed God's love through God's Son (verse 9). As the well-known verse from the Gospel of John reminds us, "God so loved

the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life" (John 3:16). Martin Luther is credited with calling John 3:16 "the gospel in miniature."

It is not surprising that John 3:16 connects so well with the themes in the letter of 1 John. Some biblical scholars have identified similarities in the style and message of the three letters of John, the Gospel of John, and the Book of Revelation. These scholars believe these books share a common tradition and grew out of the same faith community.

The author of 1 John echoed John 3:16 when he wrote, "This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: . . . that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins" (1 John 4:9-10). Jesus willingly suffered the punishment for our sins. We inherit eternal life through God's amazing gift of God's Son.

We look forward to celebrating the resurrection of Jesus on Easter each year. On the days during Holy Week preceding Easter, we are invited to pause and reflect on the meaning of the Son's sacrifice. On Maundy Thursday, we remember Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples and his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane. On Good Friday, we remember his suffering and death on the cross. Churches often drape their crosses in black on the Saturday before Easter.

It seems that our sanctuaries are full on Easter morning, while the services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to remember Jesus' suffering and death are less well-attended. Christ's resurrection is central to our faith and worship. But our joy over the Resurrection can be deeper when we take time to remember Jesus' suffering that precedes it.

We have been practicing the spiritual disciplines of praise, thanksgiving, and song. Songs offer a way for us to reflect and to give voice to our feelings and our faith. An American folk hymn expresses wonder over the depth of God's love: "What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul, . . . What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul."¹

A hymn by Charles Wesley also invites us to consider God's wondrous love: "O Love divine, what has thou done! The immortal God hath died for me! The Father's co-eternal Son bore all my sins upon the tree. Th'immortal God for me hath died: My Lord, My Love, is crucified."²

Another hymn by Charles Wesley helps us understand Christ's sacrifice as "redeem-

ing work" that reconciles us with our Creator: "'Tis finished! the Messiah dies, cut off for sins, but not his own. Accomplished is the sacrifice, the great redeeming work is done."³

How does the sacrifice of God's Son help you grasp the depth of God's love for you? What songs help you express your feelings about Christ's sacrifice?

This Is How We Know

God's gift of Jesus for our salvation is at the heart of the Christian message. It is the greatest expression of God's love for us. We are made righteous through Christ. Our relationship with God is no longer broken by sin. We respond to God's love with love. The author of 1 John wrote, "We love because God first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

A key word that describes our reconciled relationship with God is *remain*. This is the second point the author addresses in this text. He wrote, "This is how we know we remain in him and he remains in us" (verse 13). We accept the invitation to "remain" in God when we accept the truth of the gospel and place our faith in Christ. But how do we come to know that God's amazing love is true?

The author of 1 John wrote that we know this because God "has given us a measure of his Spirit. We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the savior of the world" (verses 13-14). In other words, we know this through the eyewitness testimony of the apostles who walked and talked with Jesus and who were there for the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. We know this from the testimony of men and women of faith throughout history and in the present day. We know this through God's gift of the Holy Spirit who continues to make God's presence and love known to us.

The apostle Paul declared, "God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God's love for us is not based on our merit. It is not something we can earn. God loves us because God created us and we are God's children. God's love is eternal, never-ending. In fact, there is nothing we can do to lose God's love.

Paul proclaimed this amazing truth, writing, "I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created" (Romans 8:38-39). The question we each must answer for ourselves is, Will we accept God's amazing love for us?

Who introduced you to the Christian faith? Your parents? a Sunday school teacher? a friend? How have the stories and eyewitness accounts from God's faithful people in the Bible drawn you into a relationship with God? How has the enduring testimony of Christians who have lived before us helped to confirm your faith?

The witness of Charles Wesley, for example, lives on in his hymns. When have you experienced God's amazing love for you through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit?

The invitation to remain in God is an invitation to accept God's gifts of forgiveness, redemption, and eternal life. When we do this, we are mindful of God's abiding presence with us. We no longer seek to live our lives according to our own self-centered desires. We choose instead to live a God-centered life that is grounded in God's love. We remain in God with the joyful assurance that God indeed remains in us.

How have the testimony of faithful Christians and the presence of the Holy Spirit confirmed your faith in Jesus Christ? What does it mean to you to remain in God?

This Is How Love Has Been Perfected in Us

The author introduced his third point with the phrase, "This is how love has been perfected in us" (1 John 4:17). I doubt that any of us will say that we are perfect in our love for God. It is good to know then, that "the Greek word for 'perfect' refers to the goal of a process."⁴ The Christian life is a journey. We continue to grow stronger in faith and more perfect in our love for God as we faithfully follow the example of Christ.

We may still ask ourselves, *How do I know that God's love is being perfected in me?* The early church may have asked the same question since the author of 1 John addressed it directly. He answered the question by contrasting love and fear. He wrote, "This is how love has been perfected in us, so that we can have confidence on the Judgment Day, because we are exactly the same as God is in this world" (verse 17).

We will have confidence on the Judgment Day because we no longer fear God's judgment and punishment. We have already been made righteous through the sacrifice of God's Son. Christ paid the penalty for our sin on the cross. Therefore, there is no reason to fear.

The author of 1 John notes that the opposite is also true. "The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love" (verse 18). The person who is afraid of the Judgment Day has not come to believe and "confess that Jesus is God's Son" (verse 15). This person has not come to experience and know the amazing and redeeming love of God.

The author of 1 John makes the bold declaration, "We are exactly the same as God is in this world" (verse 17). The NIV translates "in this world we are like Jesus." The idea here is that we are like God in this world because we interact in this world with love. Jesus taught us that the greatest two commandments are to love God and love our neighbor. This passage begins with the call, "Dear friends, let's love each other" (verse 7).

When we profess our faith in Christ, we promise to obey the commandment to love. We know, however, that we are not perfect in this. We make mistakes. We miss opportunities. This is why it is important to remember that being perfected in love is a process.

The author wrote, "Perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment" (verse 18). When we remain in God, we do not expect punishment. We have faith in God's gifts of forgiveness and new opportunities. The psalmist prayed, "Create a clean heart for me, God; put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me! . . . You won't despise a heart, God, that is broken and crushed" (Psalm 51:10, 17).

When have you experienced fear in your life? How have you experienced God's love driving out your fear?

This Is How

So many times in Scripture we hear the call to go. God instructed Moses to lead the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt and go to the Land of Promise. God told Elijah to go and anoint Elisha to be a prophet. After his resurrection, Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

In the text for this lesson, we hear another call: "Remain." First John 4:16 says, "We have known and have believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them."

It seems that our Christian faith is a combination of going and remaining. We go out into the world to live and work without fear because we have the assurance that God remains in us.

Moses asked for God's promise that God would remain with him and the Israelites as they journeyed across the wilderness to the land of Canaan. Without the assurance that God would remain with them, Moses may not have continued (Exodus 33:12-17). Elijah set out to anoint Elisha only after God reassured him of God's sustaining presence.

It is not always easy to obey God's call to "love each other" (1 John 4:7) and be a faithful witness for Christ in the world. How do we fulfill this call? To borrow a phrase from the author of 1 John, "This is how." We accept God's love for us as revealed in the gift of God's Son. We remain in God, knowing that God remains in us. We live without fear knowing that through God's Son we have eternal life.

Praise, Thanksgiving, and Song

As you prepare to observe the spiritual practice of praise, thanksgiving, and song this week, reflect on God's gift of all-encompassing love. Then lift your voice in praise for this amazing gift. Express your thankfulness for God's abiding and sustaining love. Sing songs of praise and thanksgiving. You may want to compose your own song or prayer that conveys your feelings.

Holy and ever-present God, thank you for the gift of your Son. Thank you for your loving and sustaining presence that remains in us always. Thank you for the assurance of salvation that casts out our fear. Help us to remain in you as we obey your call to love one another; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

¹Hymnal, 292.

²Hymnal, 287

³Hymnal, 282

⁴From *The CEB Study Bible*, New Testament; page 481.