**Let Us Pursue Love Together**

**1 John 4:7-21 (ESV)**

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We’ve taken the month of January to talk about some basics of the Christian life. We’ve talked about listening to God through the Word and we’ve talked about talking with the Lord through prayer. Today we’re going to talk about *Let Us Pursue Love Together*. In every one of these, we’ve been thinking about how we do that together. How do we listen to God together through His Word? How do we pray together? And then today, how do we really love each other well together? I would encourage you to open up your Bibles. We’re going to study through that passage of Scripture this morning. We’re going to listen to what the Holy Spirit would say to this particular church today as we read together 1 John 4:7-21.

***7****Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.* ***8****Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.* ***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.* ***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.* ***11****Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* ***12****No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.*

***13****By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.* ***14****And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.* ***15****Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.* ***16****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.* ***17****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.* ***18****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.* ***19****We love because he first loved us.* ***20****If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.* ***21****And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.*

We can’t overstate the importance of love in the Christian life. While love in the local church is not the only thing that matters, if love is not dominant in the local church then nothing else we do matters. Our validation as Spirit-born and Spirit-led people rests upon our love for one another. In writing about the necessity of love in the local church, the apostle Paul writes:

**1 Corinthians 13:1-3** If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 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. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

The emphasis there of course, is upon love among God’s people, love in the local church. It’s not just the apostle Paul that thinks this way. It’s also the Apostle Peter. He would write in his first letter:

**1 Peter 4:8** Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

Make it your first priority. Let no other priority exceed this priority.

Then of course, the Apostle John picks up this chorus and sings it over and over and over again in this first letter. John does not mind saying the same things again and again and again. So take your Bibles and flip back to 1 John 2:7.

**1 John 2:7** Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning.

**1 John 2:9-10** Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling.

Now flip forward to 1 John chapter 3.

**1 John 3:11** For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

**1 John 3:16** By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

**1 John 3:18** Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

**1 John 3:23** And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

That’s God’s commandment! It’s that we believe in Jesus and that we love one another.

So by the time we start reading chapter 4 of John’s first letter, we should have gotten the point that we need to love one another. But John not only repeats this call for us to love our spiritual brothers and sisters in the local church, but he doubles down on this message in this passage that is in front of us, in chapter 4:7-21. John presses this point so far as to assert in verse 8 that if we do not love our brothers and sisters in the church, then we don’t even know God. There is no spiritual reality in our lives, where there is no love for our brothers and sisters. Now, that’s a startling claim! John is teaching us that love is not an optional virtue for the Christian. There are not some believers who are really, really loving and then there are other believers who are not loving. No, John is teaching us that every person who is born of God’s Spirit loves their brothers and sisters in Christ. Love is a defining mark of God’s children. Without this defining mark, it becomes evident that such a person does not possess God’s DNA, and doesn’t have the life of God in their soul. Few statements in all the Bible are more startling and more sobering than this one that John writes in verse 8.

Jerome was an early church father. And he related that when the Apostle John was in his extreme old age, he was so weak that he had to be carried to church meetings. And Jerome relates that at the end of the meeting he would be helped to his feet to give a word of exhortation to the church. In his feebleness and his frailness, he would invariably just simply say this line Sunday after Sunday: “Little children, let us love one another.” The disciples began to grow weary of hearing the same words every time, and they finally asked him why he always said the same thing. Why did he always say, “Little children, let us love one another”? John is said to have replied, “Because it is the Lord’s commandment, and if this only is done, it is enough.” In other words, he said the whole of the Christian life can be summed up in this one commandment.

Friends, I pray that as we listen to the Holy Spirit through the Apostle John’s letter this morning, we would be convicted and energized and committed to pursuing love together in our local church. In this way God will receive the glory that is rightly due to His name. The central idea that we will discover through this passage is that God commands us to love one another so that our faith would be confirmed as authentic, and that it would be also perfected. That we would mature. That one command both confirms our faith as well as matures us, perfects our faith. John begins this section with a simple command.

**The Command: Let us love one another.**

***7****Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.*

John is going to repeat this little phrase, “love one another,” in verse 11 and again in verse 12. Clearly, loving one another as a people united by Jesus is a great, great concern for the Apostle John. Why would he emphasize this command so vigorously, so repetitively? The answer is because we as God’s children need to be reminded of this commandment over and over. Without a constant reminder from God through His Word by His Spirit, our community of faith, our church would become loveless and ultimately lifeless.

I have lived most of my life in the context of the local church. Growing up as a child, my family went to church three times every week, twice on Sunday and once on Wednesday night. We would often have people over from the church. Our family life really revolved around the community of faith. From young adulthood, my work life has been immersed in the church as well. So I have had opportunity to see the church up close and personal from the time I was a baby. In my relationships with God’s people over the years, I have witnessed some of the most remarkable demonstrations of faith and love imaginable. It’s been such an encouragement and joy! Yet sadly, I must report that I have also witnessed many, many times when I’ve seen God’s people, believers, set their jaw in bitterness and self-will and obstinately refuse to love one another. You see, when our flesh runs into a situation that tempts us to move away from love, our flesh will labor to discover justifications that free us from the obligation that God has placed upon us in His Word. Our wounded pride yearns for some excuse to cut others out of the circle of the concern of our lives. So our natural man creatively rationalizes away this Gospel constraint to love one another.

Now, our flesh naturally loves *some* people. Our flesh doesn’t hate *everyone*. Some people are easy to love and our flesh has no difficulty loving them. And so, if you ask a fleshly person, “Are you a loving person?” invariably, they will say yes. It is because they will think of many, many people whom they truly love, at least love by their standard.Our flesh is smart enough to know that it’s in our own best self-interest to love people who will love us back in return. But God’s love in us is measured by our willingness to love those who are hard to love, who are difficult to love. That’s how we know whether we have God’s love in our hearts. The defining question is not, “Do I love some people in my local church?” Even a fleshly person would be able to say yes to that question. The defining question is, “Are there any brothers and sisters in my local church from whom I am withholding love?” Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 5:

**Matthew 5:43-47** You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

He’s making the same point John is making here in 1 John 4. Jesus and John are pointing to something unique about the love that God places in the hearts of His own children. Just as our obedience to God is measured by the commands that we disobey and not by the commands we obey. In other words, if we say, “Are you an obedient person?” We don’t say, “Well, I have obeyed five of these ten commandments.” No, we must measure a life of obedience against the commandments that we refuse to obey.

So our love is measured by the people whom we refuse to love and not by the people whom we love. The worst of men love some people in their lives. So we look for God’s supernatural love in us to overpower all earthly objections to love. One pastor asked the question, "When the world looks at the church, do they see a love that can only be explained by the supernatural work of God?" That’s a great question. I think every believer ought to ask it. When the world looks at me as a representative of Christ, do they see a love that can only be explained by the supernatural work of God in my heart?

Friend, we must confront all the excuses that our flesh makes when we don’t want to love a brother or sister. Think with me over some of the common excuses that our selfish pride offers to tempt us away from love. I break these excuses into two different categories. I have an “I” category and I have a “They” category.

So first, consider four “I” category excuses that we make not to love:

1. I am shy. I am not a people person. I have a hard time to take the initiative to seek another’s welfare.

2. I am very busy. I don’t have time to love certain people. I make time for some people, but I don’t have time to love certain people.

3. I am too weak. I am not able to love specific people. Whether it’s their personalities that rub me the wrong way or things that they do. I imagine some people are wired to love others well, but not me. I just can’t do it. I’m too weak.

And perhaps the most common…

4. I am too hurt. I need to heal first before I can love others. I need to learn to love myself, then I will be able to truly love. So I’m focusing upon myself right now.

In all of these excuses we say, “I…I…I.” And then there are four “They” category excuses that we make not to love.

1. That person treated me harshly. They do not deserve to be loved. They need to be taught a lesson first that they can’t treat people the way they treated me. I am hurting too much to love.

2. That person has not asked my forgiveness so I am right to withhold my love from them. They would only be encouraged to sin more if I loved them now.

3. That person does not do what they are supposed to do. They need to learn responsibility. Love is only going to teach them that they get by with shirking their duties. They are big goof offs. If I love them, I will only encourage them in their laziness, irresponsibility and negligence.

4. That person is simply odd. They really are impossible for me to relate to.

So, you see all these excuses our flesh give us on why we don’t have to love in certain, specific situations. What does God mean for us to love one another? The definition of love is very confused in our world. For many, love means that we must always affirm another person’s values or beliefs or desires or attitudes or behaviors or choices. But God doesn’t love *us* in that way. He doesn’t affirm our attitudes and behaviors. In fact, He confronts us! He rebukes us! We are called by God to love as He loves. Here is the definition of love that I would encourage you to consider: Love is the giving of oneself in diligent pursuit of God’s eternal happiness for others, for the purpose of glorifying God.

It’s very active. It’s a diligent pursuit. It’s very purposeful. It’s saying, “I want that other person to experience eternal happiness in God. And the reason why I want them to experience eternal happiness is not only for their own sake, but also for the sake of God’s glory. God is worthy to be seen as lovely and beautiful and glorious.”

***7****Beloved, let us love one another…*

John anticipates a question coming back after he gives that command. He anticipates the question: Why should I? Give me some reasons John, on why I should really commit myself and get serious about loving one another in the local church. There are five reasons that John gives to us.

**Reason #1: Love assures us that we are born of God.**

***7****Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.* ***8****Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

Keep in mind John’s purpose for writing this entire letter. His purpose that he states in 1 John 5:13 is so that the reader would read his letter and they would have assurance and confidence that indeed they possess eternal life.

**1 John 5:13** I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

This is knowing with conviction and confidence that you have eternal life. God desires for us as His children to have personal assurance of our own salvation. Every one of us who are in Christ ought to have a knowledge and a confidence, a freedom from the fear of eternal condemnation and punishment. God does not desire us to be living in terror of future condemnation. Prior to chapter 4, John has already presented three main tests by which we who claim to believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior would know that we are truly children of God. So consider these three tests.

Test #1: The obedience test. Do I persistently obey God?

**1 John 2:3-6** And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

Did you catch that? He says, “Here’s how you can know whether or not you’re a true child of God. Do you persistently obey God and His commandments?” Now this doesn’t mean that a child of God never sins against God, never disobeys, never breaks a commandment of God. But what it does mean is that true children of God have an internal zeal for practical righteousness. They can’t tolerate ongoing, willful, unrepentant sin in their life. So when they do break a commandment of God, when they do disobey God, they humble themselves before God, get on their knees, confess that and turn from that sin and move toward a life of obedience.

So John is teaching us that if any sin takes root and is allowed to remain unconfessed, unchallenged, deep-rooted in our soul, then we’re going to fail the test of sonship. We have no reason to be assured that we truly are children of God. So let’s stop there and let’s ask this question. You say, “I’m a Christian.” Perhaps you say, “I’ve been baptized. I’ve prayed a prayer.” Is there any ongoing, unrepentant sin in your life that you’re not challenging? That you’re just simply living with and saying, “Well, yeah, I know God’s not pleased with this. I know this is disobedient, but this is the way life is. This is my choice.” If there is, you’ve failed the test of sonship. You have no reason to be assured that you are truly a child of God.

Test #2: The doctrinal test. Do I confess Jesus as Messiah and as the Son of God?

**1 John 2:21-25** I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life.

What he’s saying is, “Check your doctrine!” What do you believe about God and what do you believe about Jesus Christ? What we believe about God and about Jesus really matters. It separates those who are children of God and those who are children of the devil. So one cannot deny Jesus as the second Person of the Triune God--Jesus as the necessary Savior of the world, Jesus as the God of very God. One cannot deny these things and still be God’s child. God’s children live in a state of ongoing confession of the truth regarding Jesus.

Test #3: The love test. Do I truly love other children of God?

**1 John 3:14-15** We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

Those are strong words aren’t they for somebody who just simply says, “I’m not going to love this particular individual. I’m not going to reach out to them and actively pursue their eternal happiness in God.” What John is saying is that loving one another in the church is a natural outcome of regeneration. It’s a natural outcome of the life of God in our soul. Every one of these three tests is very important. Each one of these tests consider a vital organ of the Christian soul. So if one of the vital organs of the soul goes out, then the soul is dead. We can’t pass two of these tests and be content, be secure in our faith and in the knowledge of eternal life.

Obedience, sound doctrine and love for one another are all necessary signs according to John, of true spiritual life in our soul. Yet in his letter, it’s interesting. John lays the most emphasis upon the third test. That’s why after giving these tests in chapters 2 and 3, he goes back to this third test again in chapter 4 and really drives it home. Johnwrites pastorally as he seems concerned that this otherwise orthodox group of people. Remember, these are people who had stood up against the Gnostics of their day. They stood up against false teaching. They’re orthodox but they would fail the test of security, fail the ability to have assurance because they simply were not loving one another.

And again, this is a great concern for me here in our church at Bethany. I perceive that for the most part, this is a very orthodox church. I perceive that most of us have a great passion for sound doctrine. I perceive as well that most here are fighting against sin, desiring practical righteousness, pursuing obedience. Yet, it is possible to pass these two tests and fail the third. John reminds us how vital this Love Test is.

***8****Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

That word “know” means a close, personal relationship with God. The knowledge of God produces a change in our hearts in which we will love our brothers and sisters in Christ regardless of hard it is to love them. So he says

***7****Beloved, let us love one another…*

So the first reason that we ought to love one another is so that we would be able to know that we have eternal life.

**Reason #2: God is love.**

***7****Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God…*

He is the source of all love. Love is a gift that flows from God’s own being. There is no love that does not come from God. Where God is not, there is no love. That’s why hell is such a miserable place. There is no love in hell because there is no God in hell. Where God is wholly present, love is wholly at work. That’s why heaven is such a great place. It’s a place of love because God is wholly present without any interruption by any sin whatsoever. And love is abounding in an infinite, amazing way.

***8****Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

Later he’s going to make the same statement: “God is love.” He’s going to say that God’s very nature is filled with love. John is not merely saying that love is an attribute or characteristic of God’s Person. John is saying that love is at the very center of God’s nature. Whatever we think about God when we think about God, love must be central to our thoughts.

Now, love isn’t the only attribute that is central to God. John is also going to say that “God is light” (1:5). He’s going to say that “God is Spirit.” (4:24). So now he’s going to say “God is love.” Each of these qualities--light, holiness, righteousness, Spirit, which means this infinite and unchangeable being that has no created form, and love. He continually pursues the eternal happiness of His creatures. Each of these aspects are essential parts of God’s very nature.

How could God be love? The answer is because He is Triune. All of eternity past, God is love. Well, who could He love? He didn’t have angels. He didn’t have people. Who could He love? He loved Himself. You’d say, “Isn’t that selfish?” No, because God is a different Being from us. He’s One, yes, but He’s also Three. So for all of eternity past, think of this, God the Father is eternally happy in loving God the Son and God the Spirit. In all of eternity past, God the Son is eternally happy in loving God the Father and God the Spirit. In all of eternity past God the Spirit is eternally happy in loving God the Father and God the Son, these three. God is love because God is Triune. God couldn’t be love if He weren’t Triune. And that’s the amazing nature of this beautiful, glorious God. Beauty invites imitation. So Beloved, God is love, so let’s love one another.

**Reason #3: God first loved us.**

That ought to be one of the greatest motivations of our heart.

***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.* ***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.* ***11****Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

It’s not amazing that we would love God. He’s the very perfect and the very best of all beings. He is beautiful and glorious. But that God loved us is the amazing nature of His love! In this the love of God was made manifest. It became public. It became visible. How did it become visible? God sent His Son.

God took the initiative. We were not seeking after God. We were not saying, “Boy, I really want a relationship with God,” and then God responded by sending us His Son. No. We were left to our own selves, content in our own rebellion and sin when God sent His Son. He took the initiative to love when we weren’t interested in love. And God didn’t just send anyone. He sent His Son.

He didn’t send an angel or prophets. He sent the very best representative of heaven to us so that we could know who He is. He sent the One who had the power to rescue us from hell and death. God’s purpose is so that we might have life. We might have eternal happiness. We might know Him. And at what cost?

*…he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation…*

John does not write big words. So whenever John writes a big word, it’s important for us to understand it because that means John is saying, “I don’t have any simple words like I normally have, to explain things. I have got to use this big word because it is so important. What does the word “propitiation” mean? It means that the Son satisfied the wrath of God by taking upon Himself our sin and being punished for our sin on our behalf. The condemnation that we deserve, the Father placed upon Him so that condemnation, God’s justice, His righteousness was satisfied. It was propitiated upon the cross.

You see, this is why when we say “God is love,” it’s not the syrupy, sentimental kind of love. It’s the kind of love that is so righteous, so holy, it brought about the punishment of death upon His own dear Son. How do we know that God loves us? He sent His Son that we might have life through Him, to be a propitiation, an atoning sacrifice for our sins. John Owen would write, “We are never nearer Christ than when we find ourselves lost in holy amazement at His unspeakable love.”

Friend, do you ever get there? I think this is one of the key aspects of how we’re motivated to love one another, is by getting lost. Do you ever before you go to bed at night say, “I just want to get lost in the amazing nature of God’s unspeakable love for me”? How do we do that? By considering this gift, this act of God upon our lives.

***11****Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

Why else ought we to love one another? Because

**Reason #4: God abides in us.**

***12****No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected* [completed, matured] *in us.* ***13****By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.*

God’s command for us to love each other does not come merely from the outside of our person. It wells up from the inside. So God’s Spirit who is loving, takes up residence in our hearts, in our souls and begins to live His life through us. The presence of God abiding in us is not a one-time experience, but it’s constant. God is constantly indwelling us, abiding in us. As He abides in us, He is working His love in us. He is perfecting us. That is His purpose--to mature us so that we ultimately will love as God Himself loves. This work of the Spirit is uninterrupted. Our awareness of God’s loving presence often gets interrupted. In other words, we forget that this is true. But God’s loving work, loving influence, loving communication to us is never interrupted, not even for a moment. It’s important for us to understand that love is not something that we manufacture from our own efforts. We make efforts to love, but our efforts flow from the life of the Spirit that is a gift from God to us.

So why should we love our brother? Love assures us that we’re born of God. God Himself is love. God loves us first. He sent His Son as a propitiation or sacrifice. God Himself is abiding in us. He’s working this love in us.

**Reason #5: God commands us to love one another.**

***20****If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.* ***21****And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.*

If we have no other reason for saying, “You know what? I’m going to get focused on loving one another,” I’m going to hold on to this one. God simply commanded me to love.

So as we close, I want us to draw out some practical applications. It’s important, again, if we engage with this commandment in a real way, in some way that would affect our lives this week.

1. Evaluate your own soul. Are you truly born of God?

That’s the most important matter in front of you. Are you truly born of God?

2. Pursue love with your brothers and sisters in your church family.

There is some action. Pursue it actively.

3. Focus first on loving people who are hard to love.

Focus on the people who have hurt you, who have ignored you, who do not naturally attract you, who perhaps seem a bit odd to you. Make it a daily conversation with God until God transforms your heart to love that person. This might be your mom or your dad. It might be your brother or your sister. It might be your husband or your wife. It might be another person in the workplace or another person right here at church. Whoever it is, focus first on loving those people of whom you’d say, “This person is really hard to love.”

4. Look for differences that divide you from others and resolve to overcome them through love.

This is a big obstacle. There are some differences that we experience among mankind. Differences among us in God’s church are opportunities for God to work and display His love.

5. Ask God to direct you to one loving act each day toward someone outside your natural circle of love.

Do that just this week. That’s my encouragement. Let’s get started. Hebrews 10 says:

**Hebrews 10:24** And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.

And that’s what I hope to do through this message today. Wouldn’t you just take some time each day and say, “Lord, direct me to one loving act toward a person who is not in my natural circle of love.” Again, remember the Gentiles love people in their natural circle of love. But ask yourself, “Could I have one loving act? If I want to take seriously that God says, ‘Beloved, let us love one another,’ is there one thing each day this week that I could do that would demonstrate love? And Father, begin it in my heart and then work it through my hands.”

6. Talk with your brothers and sisters about how you might advance love together in Jesus’ church.

For the glory of God, Beloved, let us love one another!