

6,11,26 1 Jn. 4:7-18, The Impact of Divine Love Expressed

(1 Jn. 4:7-11) Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

First, we have to keep in mind that the word “love” in these verses is not the natural love or self-generated love of one person for another. That love (which is ‘phileo’) is a great thing and we all need to experience more of it, but by the time we reach 1 Jn. 4, John is pre-supposing two things; first, he assumes we realize that he is continuing to test his reader’s claim to abiding in Christ, and second, because of that, John uses the word ‘agape’ instead of ‘phileo’ or ‘eros’, because ‘agape’ is a love that can come only from God; no human or angel can produce this kind of love. The only way it’s possible to love like this is if we are abiding in Christ and He is reproducing His life, His love, in us.

So, we can’t read this part of 1 Jn. thinking of what we’d normally think of when we talk about people loving each other. John is not ‘testing’ natural or Soulical love; he’s looking for the unique, unconditional love that God has for us and that Jesus demonstrated as the expression of *His* abiding in His Father.

This is why John begins with “everyone who expresses agape love is born of God and knows God”. There is no greater evidence of a person’s re-birth and growth in Christ than that they find themselves unconditionally loving others. And again, as we saw in 1 Cor. 13, it’s not a love based on emotion, on how we feel about the one we are loving, it’s an action word. As Thomas Aquinas put it; “To love anyone is nothing else than to wish that person good.” We are helping them whether we like them or not;

(Rom. 12:20-21) If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

(Matt. 5:43-45) You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor' and 'Hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

You'll notice how our Lord equates this kind of love with the evidence of being "sons of your Father in heaven" because this is the way He loves; it is unique to Him and to those who share His nature.

One author (who opted to be anonymous for some reason) wrote that, "Love is more than a characteristic of God – it is His character". We see that in 1 Jn. 4 at the end of vs. 8, "God is love" (not "God has love" or "God is loving" – but God *is* love by nature.)

The implications of this for us are immense – it means that in literally every action He takes toward us as His children, the driving force is love. There is nothing that He does or allows that does not combine the motive of love with infinite wisdom. Once that becomes a reality we believe, you can see the inward rest it can bring, especially under circumstances that seem to contradict it, coupled with Satan's accusations – as when He convinced Eve that God was holding something good back from her out of jealousy, not wanting her to become like Him knowing good and evil.

If God holds something back, or adds something we don't want – something painful, His reason is sourced in what He knows would be in our best interest – all He does is *for* us. In a sense, He has no other option, because His love is not just one of several divine characteristics He draws from, agape love is the core of Who He is as a Person. He can no more act from any motive other than love than he could lie – which the Bible says it's impossible for God to do.

And of course, the Cross is the ultimate expression of God's love embodied and seen. Christ's entire life as the perfected image of the invisible God, was characterized by the same love that drove Him to *complete* His revelation of the Father to us at the Cross.

Here's some of what Hodges says about this;

God's basic nature is characterized by love. This does not mean that God has no other attributes, such as wisdom and justice. But it does indicate that love is fundamental to what God is and to what He does.

The question is often asked how a God who is love could send anyone to hell. The probable answer is not as mysterious as it sometimes seems to be. In creating the world, God took all eventualities into account and made the choices regarding the ultimate outcomes of human experience that were most consistent with all his attributes, including love. Since it is in the very nature of love that it must be spontaneous to be genuine, a world of human robots who could do nothing other than to love would be an artificial world which did not allow human beings to truly experience what their creator experiences in the giving and receiving of love.

The scriptures clearly declare that God's love is for the whole world. If man in his sin rejects that love and goes to hell, this is not what God wishes or desires, but what the Lord, in his wisdom, allows. Freedom of choice is essential in a relational world. God does not coerce either the giving or receiving of love.

Now, I'm going to touch on what has been (in my experience) the two most frequent *push-back* criticisms against God's essential nature being love. Most of the time, of course, it's coming from unbelievers trying to find a way to put a giant question mark on a God of love, but on occasion I've had Christians struggling with what appear to be contradictions in the Bible about what a loving God would or wouldn't do. I'll keep this brief, because even though it might be important to someone who's been up against these arguments, it's not directly tied into our study of 1 Jn 4.

The first one is on the "why" of God's actions in the genocide of the Canaanites. We won't take time to examine all the Biblical, historical accounts, and explanations of what these people were like, but the bottom-line is that they were a vast, growing culture of demonized humans and animals; very similar to the pre-flood

population out of which only Noah and his family were delivered. If Canaan was allowed to remain, then like cancer, it would spread and effect all the cultures around them. Removing this self-determined tumorous poison was a loving act of protection for the rest of humanity.

The second objection to God being a God of Love is the concept of the Eternal Conscious Torment (ECT) of the lost in the Lake of Fire. This is definitely a teaching the enemy likes to use in his accusations related to the character of God. Again, I don't plan to step out of the context of 1 Jn. and spend time exploring this, but because of how often I've heard this used by people to question God's love, I'll at least give a brief summary.

The phrase "The Second Death" is one of the labels attached to the Lake of Fire and it's cited four times in the book of Revelation. I don't personally believe this involves eternal torture for those who have this as their destiny.

Just as one example; when we studied Rev. 2, we learned about Polycarp, the martyred bishop of Smyrna who was a disciple of the apostle John. One of Polycarp's disciples was Irenaeus who wrote; "The death of the wicked is not an endless punishment, but a deprivation of immortality." So, if this subject is something you would like to examine, let me know and I can send you the transcript (or the audio) of our detailed study of the Lake of Fire in Revelation 20.

But there are convincing arguments on the two main doctrines related to the final destiny of the lost (Eternal Conscious Torment & Annihilation), and the fact that I lean toward the "deprivation of immortality" does not mean I would sever fellowship with anyone who believes in ECT. It's a complex theological teaching and I'm sure that whichever doctrine turns out to be accurate will not, in any way, lessen what we already know of the essential nature and character of God as being that of infinite love. Whatever we lack in understanding now will be cleared up the moment we are face-to-face with our Savior.

So, back to our context in 1 Jn., John is equating "born of God" and "knows God" with those who are genuinely abiding in Christ. Those not abiding in Him may belong to God, but in experience, their actions reveal that there is either limitation

or absence of abiding in Him if there is no expression of agape love shown to others.

It's just John's way of saying what James wrote about faith when he wrote in Jas. 1:14; "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone *says* he has faith but does not have works?" What people *claim* to possess, whether faith or love, is evidenced by their actions, not just by their professions.

Now, a quick qualifier – don't panic if you don't see this kind of love flowing from you in abundance. Loving as Christ loves is the result of a great deal of time, suffering and experience by growing in the knowledge of Christ. Love like this comes through the progressive formation of inward character by the discipline of the Holy Spirit- which never happens overnight for anyone. It's just important to know what God's goal is, and that we should align our prayers with His goal for us. Ultimately, the goal is Christlikeness in character, not just imitated behavior. We can imitate actions for the sake of the person in front of us in some circumstances, and it's probably better if we do than if we don't, but regardless, the most important thing is that our hearts are set on what God's heart is set on; and we are praying and seeking to learn and experience whatever is needed to move us past imitation to conformity to Christ.

Inward conformity to Christ comes slowly as a process, not an event, and it's based on learning how to abide in Christ and allow His words abide in us. That's our focus; God will take care of the outcome.

So, let me share something I found on the principle of abiding that might help.

What is abiding? Abiding in Christ, as we have often said, is the opposite of abiding in ourselves. To abide in ourselves is simply to try to do this living, and this working for the Lord ourselves; asking the Lord to help us to do it, instead of recognizing that a Life wholly pleasing to God has been lived and offered, and that faith trusts in Christ to be that Life in us. Abiding in Christ is simply doing everything, meeting everything in dependency on Christ. It is a sure ground. There is no need for question and reasoning: "Can it be done? Can I do it?" Or, "I am not sure about it." The Lord Jesus has met everything

that you or I will meet, and in all things, He has done what is needful. His experience and victory is available to faith, and faith says, "Well, for me to think I could do this relying on my own resources would be absurd, even to attempt the thing would be ridiculous; as to myself it would be folly to even contemplate it. But it can be done; I can meet this demand; I can go through with this, 'I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me, ("all" is a big word). It is what Christ is as our secret source of strength, sustenance, and nourishment.

This is a school, and we learn this lesson in a progressive way. We have to learn how to look to Jesus the Author and Finisher of our faith, and to do so progressively, step by step, like little children, first of all learning to walk and to talk. Like them we are confronted with things which we have never done or even attempted before, things which are all new and strange; a new world, sometimes a very terrible world. The contemplation of taking his first step to a little child is a most terrifying proposition. You and I are brought into this realm of faith, wherein the simplest thing at the beginning, the taking of a first step, is sometimes fearful for us. But there are arms stretched out, and those arms now represent for us the accomplishment of what is required of us, the thing is done. The strength is there, available for the matter in hand, recognizing those arms and trusting, taking the step, we learn to walk by Christ, to live by Christ; and next time we shall be able to go a bit further. Each time capacity is being enlarged and we are coming to a fuller measure of maturity.

I appreciate the fact that he is talking to us as if we were little children who are clueless about what a spiritual relationship really is, how we enter into it, and in a sense, expecting (knowing) that this is going to take a lot of practice, time and patience. We're learning how to live in a way we've never lived before – applying the cross to ourselves daily (no self-expectation); but applying faith and dependence on our indwelling Lord.

One of the things about abiding and walking by faith that has been somewhat confusing is the emphasis throughout the New Testament on our obedience as

being something more than simply exercising faith in Christ's strength. On the one hand, we know that "apart from Him we can do nothing"; our Lord made that clear in the illustration of the Vine and the Branches. On the other hand, in Phil. 4:13 we see Paul saying, "I can do all things through Christ . . . ", and of course James' statements like "faith without works is dead".

So, I'm going to share something that might help bring these together – somehow, it has to be a mindset of faith in Him, not us – but it also has to be us in obedience, in action. See if you think what Sparks wrote on this is helpful;

You see that God never takes our will away, nor our mind, nor our heart. Some people expect God to come and do all their choosing for them, and all their desiring for them, and all their deciding for them, while they are simply to be poor things picked up by God and put into things which He desires and wills. God never does that. He is developing a humanity. God has created a kind of being with a rational mind. The three-fold element of spirit, soul and body is still to be found, yet not now in Adam, but in Christ. God is developing the Christ mind; how He thinks, judges, understands, and when we see the Lord's mind we see how very different it is from our own natural mind; and our own natural mind is off the mark altogether, and we must repudiate it. This is spiritual understanding, the mind of the Spirit.

The same thing applies to our feelings and our desires. They may lead us all astray. There is a new mind in Christ for our hearts, but there is always the necessity for our standing with the Lord in what is of Himself. Passivity may be a most ruinous thing. In all the values of Christ risen there has to be a taking of that risen Life for the equivalent need of mind, heart, will; of spirit, soul, and body.

So, it's an issue of both Christ as our life, but also us, as a new type of humanity, obtaining a renewed mind and an intentional obedience to what we know is of Christ. We act in dependence on His strength, but we also act with a growing comprehension of what true life and righteousness are meant to be. We grow into people who personally want what the Lord wants, and at the same time, we know

that Christ must be our Resource to accomplish our “new creation” humanity desires.

Because of the new nature we have, which is growing as we grow into the image of Christ, we will increasingly want to do and be righteous. It won't be an issue of obedience to a Law or Commandments or Christian duties and expectations; it will be our heart's desire to do good – not a burden of legalism, but the easy yoke of union with Christ.

And because Christ indwells us, we will have the strength to do what our new nature compels us to do. We can do all things through Christ Who strengthens us.

We see life completely differently that we did in our old life; we also realize that to live the new life we've been brought into, we will need to be fully dependent on the strength of the Lord to accomplish what we are now seeing as newly born sons of God.

We are becoming a new type of humanity that sees life completely different than the way we saw it before, and by faith we learn to draw from resources other than our own to live it.

We are being transformed into the image of Christ, who is the Head and First Born of this new race and this new humanity lives by His indwelling life instead of by the natural strength of the flesh.

As the Potter shapes the clay, through the experiences the Lord takes us through, and by what we are learning through His Word, we are being shaped by the Holy Spirit into the exact image of the son of God.

(Rom. 8:29) For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He (Christ) might be the firstborn among many brethren.

At the Cross, Christ was the last Adam; when He died, He ended the old humanity. In His resurrection, He is the “Second Man”. All in Adam died in Christ; just as all *in* Christ live by Him.

(1 Cor. 15:47-49) The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the Second Man is the Lord from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man.

We are new – and it is imperative that we understand what that means and that we learn how to live as new creations.

As clear or unclear as all that is, I feel that we will never fully understand the means or the value of abiding in Christ until this new creation mindset increasingly becomes the way we see all of life.

Ok, back to 1 Jn. 4. In vs's 12-16 John continues to build on what we've seen by adding a few nuances to this to help clarify his message;

No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.

Now that we know more about the kind of "love" God is referring to (His love, His Life stamped in us and expressed through us), John can remind us that no one has seen God visibly and that the only way those around us will see the Lord is if we love one another as a result of abiding in Christ and, over time, having His love developed in us.

The outward, visible expression of God's image and Life seen in His children results from all we've learned about 'abiding'. This is the terminology the Spirit chose to give us through John, which as we saw, matched the terminology Christ used in John 15.

If we abide in Him, which is relational dependency in action, and if His words abide in us, which is prayerful study of the Bible, then over time, God's love, the love that

is characteristic of God Himself, will be “perfected” in us because He has given us His Spirit to make this happen.

The reason John adds a few sentences related to our confession of Jesus’s identity is partly to again expose and counter the false identities of Christ being spread by false apostles, but it’s also to ensure that when we abide in Christ, we are abiding in the true Jesus. When that happens, agape love, the kind of love that is unique to the nature of God, is gradually expressed through us and seen in our relationships with one another, demonstrating that God is in us. That’s how others will know that we are His disciples. We are embodying that which is supernatural; that which can’t be imitated; can’t be produced, by anyone who is not indwelt by the Spirit of God.

Once it’s fully understood, John’s argument and appeal is rock solid. This is how we know who is and who is not living out from the source of the true God. I think it’s incredibly encouraging to realize that in God’s mind, of all that He is and has, God has chosen His love to be His defining and most convincing characteristic.

That tells me that the one thing about God that will be the most obvious and consistent characteristic of heaven, of God’s eternal kingdom, will be the eternal experience by all of His creation of agape love. We will breathe love in the same way we now breathe air. It’s our life, and sustainment and our greatest need, and it is freely given by God’s grace forever, because He will *never* stop giving Himself to us.

Even in this life, we are offered a foretaste of the meaning of sharing of God’s glory. It’s far from perfect, but we are being taught to press for an ever-greater knowledge and experience of God’s infinite love. I personally think that this is at least part of what is meant by John 7:38; “He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, from within him shall flow rivers of living water.” Listen to Watchman Nee’s comments on that verse;

We need to pay special attention to the word “flow” here. Such a term does not suggest the use of pulpit techniques, a certain tone of voice, some profound self-help psychology, some eloquence, some humor, persuasive

argument or learning. These things are neither the living water nor the mechanism by which the living water issues forth. To “flow” suggests something supernatural and spontaneous; it requires no human effort but simply flows through us.

The life and power of the Holy Spirit appear to flow naturally through our spirit. Otherwise, no matter how passionately we preach, our audience will listen passively. And even if sometimes they may seem to pay full attention and may seem to understand and be moved, nevertheless, what we say can only draw a praise from their mouths without giving them the life and power to do what they hear. We must be the channels of more than words; we must be channels of God’s Life.

Nee is focused on the power of divine Life flowing into and out from our spirits; but the same could be said of God’s love. There will be times when spiritual Truth may be what is most needed, and when it is, it needs to have the same supernatural source as everything that comes from God’s Spirit. But for our application in 1 Jn., there are many occasions when that which will have the greatest impact on those who watch us and listen to us, will be the love of God they sense flowing from us as naturally as a river of living water, but as alien from the self-centered love of this world as Jesus is – as One Who is not of this world, and as One Who has an immense appeal as well as being a captivating mystery.

When Jesus passed by, people experienced something that both overwhelmed and mystified them. But whatever their response was, neutrality or indifference was never an option. All it took was His existence to get their attention.

That is the life and love the Holy Spirit working to reproduce in us, as the second body of Christ sent into all nations, this time corporate and not limited to Palestine. It is impossible for us to imitate that, no matter how hard we try or how polished we get; but what is not possible for Man *is* possible for the God Who has made us His dwelling place and His means or vessel of expression.

This might be a good time for a brief refresher on exactly what that dwelling place is. Here's an explanation on what the Church, from God's perspective, has always been intended to be;

The Church is Christ in living union with His own, that wherever two or three are gathered together in His name there He is in the midst. That is the Church. You do not build special buildings and call them "the Church." You do not have special organizations, religious institutions, which you call "the Church." Believers in living union with the risen Lord constitute the Church. This is the reality, not the figure. Now in union with Christ risen all human limitations are transcended. This is one of the wonders of Christ risen as a living reality. We are brought into a realm of capacities which are more than human capacities, where, because of Christ in us, we can do what we never could do on our own. Our relationships and resources are new relationships and resources; they are sourced in heaven. That is why the Apostle said that God has chosen the weak things, the foolish things, the things which are despised, and the things which are not, that He by them might bring to nothing the wise, the mighty, the things which are. Why did God appoint it so? Because it is not by might, nor by power, but by His Spirit; and to show that there are powers, energies, abilities for His own which transcend all the greatest powers and abilities of this world. The Church is no more or less that Christ Himself corporately expressed.

Once the full reality of that understanding hits us, not only does it radically alter the way we live, but it also instantly exposes everything that is *not* the Church and shows it to be nothing more than man's best attempts to do something which only God can do.

Now, we will have to close soon, but what John wrote next is kind of unexpected. At first it might appear to be a tangent of some kind, but I think I can show that it fits perfectly and also that it's a very good thing that this is where John went after what we've just seen. So, here's the next passage;

(vs's 17-18), Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world.

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.

Let me paraphrase this;

The evidence and the outcome of agape brought to maturity among us results in us having confidence at the Judgement Seat of Christ; because as He is and as He walked, we also have been and have walked in this world. Love repels fear because fear is concerned with torment. He who is concerned with torment at the Judgement Seat is not yet mature in love.

We've seen several times that all Christians will appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:1) to give an account of their lives here. I think the most time we spent on this was in 1 Cor. 3 where Paul talked about us, either receiving or suffering the loss of rewards.

So, at that time, there is the possibility for some believers of discovering that their immaturity has resulted in losing rewards, which will be an experience that will cause some degree of fear or shame.

(1 Jn. 2:28) And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming.

Again, 'abiding in Him' is how love is matured; and mature love increases a sense of confidence in knowing that this love is a benchmark of success as related to the walk of a Christian in this life.

As Zane Hodges describes it;

A little reflection will show that once a Christian knows on the authority of God's word that he is keeping God's command to love others, He can realize that any anxiety about his future accounting at the Judgment Seat is unnecessary.

Now, I am aware of the potential subjectivity in something like this. Is my love mature? Is it getting there? Should I have anxiety since I know I'm far from loving as Christ does?

First, no one loves perfectly and no one *will* love perfectly until we are glorified in Christ. Second, self-examination is potentially dangerous depending on our personality or ‘bent’. Pride takes it one direction; self-condemnation takes it another direction and neither may be accurate, only God knows for sure.

That’s why John gave us some specifics in 1 Jn. 3 for when we want to avoid subjectivity and emotion, and have something objective to look at.

(1 Jn. 3:18-23) My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.

Notice that John talks about “assuring our hearts before Him”. That’s just another way of addressing the idea of how to respond to a “condemning heart”, which we all struggle with from time to time – at least those of us who are aware of our frustrating imperfections.

That’s why we “hunger and thirst for righteousness”, which Jesus says is a *good* thing and *wouldn’t* characterize us if thought we were perfect.

So, Jn. 3:18-23, simply tells us to see if we have “believed on the Name of His Son, Jesus Christ” and if our desire and actions have been to “love one another”.

All of us have placed our faith in Christ to both save and mature us, and our love to others is not an issue of perfection, but of direction or advancement. Our heart can tell us we fall short, and we can agree, but we can also remind our hearts that we genuinely desire to both possess and express the love of Christ to our brothers and sisters, and that we will do so in the measure of our growth.

Our focus, based on the entire theme of John's letter, is not on trying to list our good deeds and hope the number of them gets a passing grade – the focus is on doing what we can, and learning what we can, about abiding in Christ.

If after we've studied all of 1st. John, we still have no clue about what it means to abide in Christ, then, yes, that might be a problem. But if we do have a fairly good idea of what that means, and as a result we genuinely intend to make abiding in Him the focus of our daily lives in our relationship with Christ, then as Hodges said, "anxiety is unnecessary". So, we do what we are able to do trusting the Lord to sustain and advance us, and we move forward resting in Him.