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1 John 4:9-19

Fourth Message

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RELYING ON GOD'S LOVE

SERIES: WHAT GREAT LOVE!

I'm so excited that I get to share with you today about how much God loves you. I can't think of a better way to start off our new year than exploring the depth of God's love for us. Though his love is foundational to our faith it is something many of us still have a hard time getting a handle on.

Not long ago I read about how Gary Burge, a professor at Wheaton College, conducted an experiment in his New Testament classes. He asked his students to write a one-page essay analyzing whether their lives had been shaped by the threat of God's law or the wonder of God's grace. He reports that he was devastated by the results. Over 90 percent of his students admitted that the possibility of God's disfavor and wrath had shaped their Christian outlook since childhood. God's unending love was not foremost in their minds, but his possible displeasure was.

Christianity, they reported, was for them really about following the rules. These were mature young men and women who came from strong evangelical churches and families, and their reflex was to try to please God so that he would continue to favor them. Many lived in genuine fear of God. In his dismay, Professor Burge asks the haunting question, "Who has stolen the good news out of the gospel?"¹

How about you? Are you living out of the firm foundation of God's love for you, or are you living in fear of his displeasure with you? I can relate to those feelings of fear.

As a child I was drawn to the Lord, as my Heavenly Father, because of the love I felt in my home and within the church community of PBC Palo Alto. Neither my home life nor the church was perfect but they were places where I was loved. I knew God because of love. I knew love because of God. I experienced one because of the other.

I'm sad to say that as I grew older I drifted away from the anchor of God's love and sought more and more the approval of others. I became a 'people-pleaser,' willing to do whatever it takes to be liked, loved, appreciated, and respected by others. It is a 'performance-based' love; somewhere along the way I became convinced that love is something I must earn.

The love of God and approval of others became so intertwined for me that when I feel the judgment of others, especially from the authority figures in my life, it feels as though God himself is displeased with me. Instead of living in freedom and security in God's love I easily fall into feelings of anxiety, unrest, and self-judgment.

I believe I'm not the only one. Many of us have drifted away from the foundational reality that God loves us deeply and unconditionally. We have drifted away from living out of our true center, our true identity as God's beloved children.

For the next four weeks we will be reflecting in 1 John on what I believe to be four of the major themes in his letter. Instead of bringing these passages to you in the order in which John presents them, I

will be teaching them in the order that resonates most deeply within me and most reflects my journey with the Lord.

It all begins with the love of God. Everything else emanates from that central reality, so that is where we begin. 1 John 4:16 is where we find John encouraging his flock with three simple yet powerful words:

God is love. (1 John 4:16b)

Our understanding of God and the image of him we carry around in our head and heart is so important because it shapes how we worship and how we live our life. Is he simply our patriarch, the aging grandpa who sits back in his rocking chair, patting us on the head and giving us candy when we spend time with him and do nice things? Is he the great watchmaker who meticulously sets the world in motion but never enters in? Is he the beat-cop who watches our every move and whacks us with his nightstick whenever we step out of line?

John wrote his three pastoral letters to his flock who were being tempted to believe and follow a dangerous and false teaching on the character and nature of our triune God. So the twin themes of this first letter are light and love. God is light and God is love, and those who are his children will exhibit his light and love.

That John would make such a bold declaration might be hard to swallow for some of us, because there are times in our life when it certainly doesn't seem God is love. Is God really love when my parents divorce, or when I don't get accepted into the college I had my heart set on? Is he love when I lose my job, or when a dear friend or family member dies before their time? When life is hard and tragedy strikes, it can be really difficult to stay anchored in the truth that God is love. Is he really love all the time?

John's emphatic answer is 'Yes,' he is love all the time. Love is who he is, and love is what he does. Love is not an occasional attribute of God; it is the essence of his being. His love is not fickle. His love is not dependent upon whether he had a good night sleep or his morning coffee. Love is not one of many hats that he wears. It is his very nature. Though it may not always look like it or feel like it, every action of God is motivated by and filled with his love for us.

So the question that rises up within us is, "How can we know the love God has for us, live in it, and let it complete its work in us?" It is a very powerful question.

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:9-10)

The first thing John says is that we know God loves us because he sent his one and only Son that we might live through him.

To understand the true nature of love we don't look within ourselves at our limited human love for God; we look at the love God showed us. The foundational belief of most religions is that human-kind must take the initiative and seek after God, and only the most worthy will find him. The God of the Bible is a far cry from this notion. He is not keeping his distance. He is not playing "hard to get." Quite to the contrary, he initiates with us. He is the great Shepherd who seeks and saves the lost sheep.

We won't really appreciate the wonder of God's love for us until we take to heart where we would be without it. The Bible makes it clear that by our nature we are born apart from God, doomed to darkness and death because of our trespasses and sin. Our God, who is love and who is light, and in whom is no darkness, cannot tolerate sin. Our path to fellowship with God can only be opened up through one who is sinless.

Jesus, who knew no sin, stands before God the Father not to declare our innocence but to declare our guilt, and then steps in to pay the penalty of our sin himself. He is our advocate and atoning sacrifice. It is only out of God's love for us that we move from death to life.

To say "God is love" may seem to suggest a certain distant and impersonal love. We don't feel the full weight of his love for us as individuals because God loves 'everybody.' Let me reassure you that God's love is personal. He had you and me in mind when he sent his Son into the world. He loves you, and he wants you to live through him.

I want to make sure that what lands with full force upon your heart and mind is that God doesn't love you once you get your act together. He loves you when you are still a sinner. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

Most of us are tempted to believe that we are loved only when we are partially known. If people really knew my deeds and my thoughts they would not really love me. The cross of Christ is evidence that God knows our whole story and loves us. He knows our sin and virtue, our fears and our love, our anguish and our hope.

He knows everything about us. Nothing in us is hidden from him, and yet he does not move away from us. He comes toward us offering us his unconditional love and life through his Son Jesus Christ. We are fully seen by God, and the eyes that see us are the eyes of forgiveness, mercy, and love.

Whenever we doubt God's love for us because of our sin or the troubles in our life, we must turn our eyes to the cross and remember his gift of love. It is through the gift of his one and only Son Jesus Christ that God demonstrates clearly that he does not turn a blind eye to our sin or turn his back on our suffering. He bore our sins and enters our pain. The cross of Christ shouts boldly through all eternity that God loves us. There is no greater demonstration of love. What an amazing gift!

How can we know the love God has for us? We know it because he showed us his love when he sent his one and only Son that we might live through him. That alone is enough to convince us of God's love. But there is more.

This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them

and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. (1John 4:13-16)

We know we can live in God's love because his Spirit dwells within us. Not only has our Heavenly Father sent his Son into the world as our Savior (which was seen and testified to by the apostles), he has also given his Spirit to dwell within our hearts. God's love for us is demonstrated not in just a one-time act of love, but in his ongoing presence within us every moment of our life. This is exactly what Jesus promised when he said, "...the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you" (John 14:17).

We "know" God loves us, but do we rely on the love God has for us? Has that knowledge moved from our head into our heart and our actions. We will talk more in the coming weeks about what a life relying on the love of God looks like, but our first step of faith in relying upon God's love is acknowledging Jesus Christ as the Son of God and submitting ourselves to him as our Savior.

When we make that step of faith we demonstrate that God lives in us and we in him, for "no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3b).

This mutual indwelling of believers in God and God in believers is a wonderful mystery, but it is a very real spiritual relationship that we can rely upon through the presence of the Spirit. We know we can live and grow in God's love because the work of the Spirit within us brings both the experience and expression of that love, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22).

God's love for us is not a one-time declaration – it is a daily presence. I think of my marriage in these terms as well. It is one thing on your wedding day to say, "*I love you for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health 'til death do us part,*" but it is quite another thing to live out that love and rely on that love throughout the length of marriage. My wife declared her love to me with wonderful vows, but it is the love she shows me every day that builds an intimacy where I not only know but also rely on her love.

God's activity in Christ and his gift of the Holy Spirit within us are indisputable evidence that our Heavenly Father loves us with all that he is, and we can rely on that love. God is "all-in." He has held nothing back. Are you "all-in" with him? Are you receiving his love, growing in his love, and living in his love?

Because of my time with a wonderful Christian brother I have begun to use a helpful spiritual tool called the Examen. At the end of each day I just ask myself a few questions: "Where did I see, feel, and participate in God's love for me today? When was I fully present in that love?" and that is followed by the question, "Where did I miss God's love for me? When was I not fully present in his love?" It is a very simple exercise that helps me to be more attentive throughout the day to God's presence within me and more deeply receive the constant love he has for me.

How can we know we can live in and rely on God's love? We know it because He has given us his Spirit who dwells within us.

This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is

not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:17-19)

We know God's love transforms us because we are like Jesus. By nature we are all 'in Adam' (1Cor. 15:22), but through faith in Jesus as our Savior we are placed 'in Christ' (Gal. 3:26). Jesus is the Son of God. So when God places us "in Christ" we too become children of God. When God looks upon us he sees us all as his children through his Son. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ" (2Cor. 5:17-18).

We are like Jesus. We are children of God, and so we need not fear his punishment on the day of judgment. This particular word for 'punishment' is found in only one other place in the New Testament. Jesus uses the word at his conclusion of the parable of the sheep and goats, where he makes it quite clear that a day is coming when he will return for his bride, the church. On that judgment day he will separate the sheep from the goats. Those who are not in his will "go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matthew 25:46).

We need not live in fear of that day because we are like Christ. We can approach God with the confidence that a beloved child approaches his father. As the Apostle Paul said, "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Rom. 8:15-16).

What wonderful assurance. Our fear of God's punishment is replaced with confidence of God's love. This is a wonderful gift, because I can remember how big of an impact the fear of future punishment can have on the present moment. I used to get into trouble all the time as a boy. I remember even now those days when I had really misbehaved during the morning hours and instead of receiving an immediate and appropriate punishment from my mother she would utter those terrifying words, "Wait 'til your father gets home." That was the worst. That was all I could think about all afternoon. I was paralyzed with fear until my dad got home from work, knowing full well that when he did I would be looking at a good spanking.

Living in fear robs us of peace and grace. We do not have to earn God's love nor be in fear of losing God's love, because he loved us first. When we live in fear of God, we are not entering into his love. We cannot approach him in love and hide from him in fear at the same time. That is not what God wants for us, and that is not what God has for us. He doesn't want us to live in fear that paralyzes us, but to live in love that produces confidence and freedom to live and love boldly and selflessly like Jesus.

How can we know God's love transforms us? We know it because we are like Jesus. We are children of God. Our fear of God's punishment is replaced with confidence of God's love.

This is something God continues to work on in me. I am a work in progress. God has been so gracious and patient with me as I slowly trust more and more in the love he has for me. God has been teaching me, through the help of others and this letter of 1 John, that I can carry the confidence of his love for me when I encounter the judgment of others. The only way I can deal in healthy ways with the expectations and judgments of others (and myself) is to be firmly anchored in his love for me.

How do we battle the voices that bombard us from within and without that we are unloved and unlovable? Whenever our interactions with others, or our perceptions of God or ourselves are shaped by fear and anxiety, we must come back to the cross and the truths of the Scripture. It is there we can plumb once again the depth of his commitment and love for us demonstrated in sending his Son and giving us his Spirit that we might enjoy the life and love of God.

With that foundation we can affirm the scandalous truth that our holy and sovereign God is at the same time our Heavenly Father who loves us and will never leave us nor forsake us. It is his love we can rely on each and every day. With such love we are moved not to keep him away from any part of ourselves, but to invite him to touch the deepest places of our heart so that we won't belong to anyone but him. This is the "good news" of the gospel that no one can ever take away.

May we all be convinced "that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39).

1. Gary M. Burge, *The Letters of John*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1996), 195-196.

