

November 26/27, 2011

**God is Love**  
*Cultivating Authentic Christian Community*  
**1 John 4:7-21**  
Pastor Bryan Clark

Over the last couple of months we've been talking about *Authentic Christian Community* and it's good to remind ourselves, community isn't a program. It's not a method; it's not a gimmick. Community is more like a value—it's a way of life. It's not something you can turn on and off like a light switch. You can't just say, "Now we'll have thirty minutes of community." It just doesn't work that way. It's either how you live your life or you don't. Several months ago several of us were talking about community and Ben shared a quote that all of us found helpful, by Hugh Halter. The quote goes:

*People who only dream of community usually destroy it, but those who love people without expectation unknowingly create it.*

It reminds us that community isn't really the product; it's more like a by-product that flows out of a choice to live life by loving like Jesus loved. As long as you find yourself *shopping* for community—that seems like a good word to use this weekend, doesn't it?—as long as you're shopping for community, you'll never find it. As long as you're in the mindset of a consumer—"This is about me and this is about what I want; this is what I need; this is about me and my needs"—as long as your orientation is selfish like that, community is always going to elude you. The only way, ultimately, to experience community is to love as Jesus loved. But that raises the question, "How do we do that?" And that's what we want to talk about today. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 John, Chapter 4; we're going to pick it up in verse 7.

**Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.** (\*NASB, 1 John 4:7-8)

John is dealing with a very specific problem—it's good to keep remembering this—with false teachers who are putting forth a counterfeit Christianity. They live unloving lives. They live immoral lives. There's simply no evidence of the truth doing anything in them. That's contrasted with what has radically changed within the hearts of those who have genuinely believed. Now this is the third time John has dealt with the topic of love. He kind of goes in these cycles, and each time he repeats some of what he said before, and then he expands on it. It's good to remind ourselves of the biblical definition of love. Love is not primarily a feeling. You can't command someone to feel a certain way about somebody else. Love, according to the Bible, is a commitment of the will. It's a choice to die to myself, to consider somebody else more important than myself. It's a decision to give myself away for the good of another. That isn't about my feelings; it's about my will and my choice to either do that or not do that. The text reminds us that ultimately **God is love**. Love comes from God and he says everyone who **...is born of God and knows God...**those are the people that love.

Now one of the interesting questions that rolls out of these opening two verses is whether or not an unbeliever can love. It seems like what John is saying is the only way you can love is to know God

and to have experienced His salvation. Now this is a rather delicate conversation because, on one level, there's no question that people that don't believe can love. I know husbands and wives that love each other, the parents that love their children, the children love their parents, friends that love one another—there's no question about that. That too, though, is a reflection of love that comes from God. It's a reflection of what it means *to be made in the image of God*. It's what we refer to as *common grace*. It still is from God, whether they realize that or not.

But I would also suggest to you that, in our culture, love is much more selfish than most people realize. In other words, in our culture love is still primarily about how you make me feel. If you make me feel good, if you give me a sense of significance, if you give me pleasure, if you're meeting some need in my life, there's a tendency, then, to understand that as love. And one of the ways that we see that is when that relationship no longer delivers the goods—when you're no longer giving me pleasure, when you're no longer making me happy, when you're no longer making me feel significant, you're no longer giving me what I long for. We tend to start distancing ourselves from that relationship, sometimes even to the point where we terminate that relationship, which reminds us that probably wasn't so much about love because, as long as I wasn't getting what I wanted and what I needed, I wasn't that interested in the relationship anymore. It's also possible that we, together, can be a very loving family, but that can be very selfish in its orientation. A husband, a wife and kids—as long as *we* love each other and make each other feel good and we're happy—we're satisfied. And it doesn't really matter to us that there are people outside of our little circle that are struggling, that are in pain, that are in despair. As long as I have what I need, as long as we're happy, that's all that really matters. And that orientation, while it may be thought of as love in our culture, is still very selfish at the end of the day. It's very different than the love that Jesus defined. Jesus said, "Love your enemy." Jesus said, "Love those who persecute you." Jesus modeled for us what it means to love as He spent time with those that the culture were unwilling to love. He hung out with sinners and tax-collectors and prostitutes. He hung out with the sinners and misfits and losers. He touched the untouchables; He loved the unlovable and really raised the bar on love to a level the world had not seen before.

So when John is talking about this love that is from God, he's talking about that which comes from the very heart of God—the very essence of God—and for us to experience that kind of love and to love that way, something deep within us has to change. Something has to be transformed for us to love as God loves. So that's what he's talking about. You can't do that apart from experiencing the love of God.

In chapter 2 we talked about two different operating systems: a system of *grace* and a system of *the world*. As long as you're still operating according to the operating system of the world, you cannot love. The system itself won't allow that. As long as you choose to be your own god and to define your own significance and your own value based on your own performance, then for you, life is a competition. Life is all about comparison. Every single person in your world is a competitor and, as long as that's true, I can't afford to die to myself. I cannot afford to give myself away, because what I'm giving away is my significance. What I'm giving away is my value and I can't afford to do that, and so I will never really be free to love. It's only when we have experienced a life change through Jesus Christ that we can be rightly related to God and, through that relationship, I get my significance and my value, which now sets me free not to have to perform for my significance and value. So I'm free now to die to myself and to give myself away, because my significance and value is rightly rooted in God. Until I make that change in operating systems, I'll never really be free to love without expectation. I think all of that has to do with what John is saying in verses 7 and 8. Verse 9:

**By this the love of God was manifested in us (or among us), that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so 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.** (Vs. 9-11)

The key phrase is that phrase—**By this...**In other words, this is how God unveiled His love—He manifested His love; He revealed it; He unveiled it. The text reminds us—this is a great text for opening the Christmas season—that God was willing to give up His own Son in order that we might experience life. The love of God is not religious theory. It was demonstrated; it was unveiled; it was made known; it was manifested. He says that He **sent His son to be the propitiation for our sins**. Now that's an expensive theological word. We had it in chapter 2. It basically means that, at one point, there was an obstacle between us and God—and the obstacle was our sin. Jesus came to earth in order to pay for that sin, in order to satisfy God's standard of holiness, that He might offer us salvation that we might enter into a relationship with Him. Therefore, in essence, what John is saying is, Jesus removed the obstacle, that we might experience life.

Now this has been a key concept for John. We started in chapter 1 with John talking about Jesus as the *Word of Life*. For all eternity God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit have dwelt in relationship with one another. There's no time when God *became* relational. There was no time when God *became* loving. God has *always* been relational. He's *always* been love. That's the very essence of His being. So for all eternity God dwelt in relationship with Himself. It's the Father loving the Son, the Son loving the Spirit, the Spirit loving the Father, the Father celebrating the Son, the Spirit celebrating the Father—this beautiful relationship where the essence of life, the very fountainhead of life itself, is defined by giving oneself away. We reminded ourselves that when Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and to give our lives away, it's not so that we would experience less. It's so that we could enter into the life that has defined God for eternity. Theologians for years have referred to that as *The Dance of God*: the Father loving the Son, the Son the Spirit, the Spirit the Father. It's this beautiful picture of this dance of God. In essence then, when Jesus came to earth, He came to earth in order to reveal this life. He came as the *Word of Life*, that he might reveal to us: This is where life is found. This is the deepest, richest life that has defined God forever. Jesus came along and through His sacrifice—His willingness to be the propitiation for sin—He invites us into this life that we might dance with God, that we might experience the deepest, richest, most soul-satisfying life now and forever. That's the essence of the gospel and that's what John is saying.

What was the price tag necessary to make this possible? The answer is: **God gave his only begotten Son**. Now there are counterfeit Christian groups that take this phrase *only begotten Son* and say Jesus isn't eternal; Jesus actually was born of God, had a starting point, but then will live forever just like us. And it comes out of this phrase ...**only begotten Son...**which, in the English, may sound like it hints at that, but the Greek language does not allow that interpretation at all. It just means *one and only son*—the only unique Son of God. For example Isaac was referred to as Abraham's only begotten son. It wasn't Abraham's *only* son, but it was his *unique* son. So the term basically means this was God's unique Son, His special Son, that He was willing to sacrifice in order to remove the obstacle that we might experience His life.

So let's process it this way: Patti and I have three beautiful girls and I love them with all my heart. If you were to ask me this morning to die for them, I wouldn't even have to think about it. I would do it in an eye-blink. But that's not the question this morning. The question is: would I be willing to sacrifice the life of one my girls in order to save the life of another? Would I willingly be able to

put one of my girls forth to die in order to save someone else? But let's take it up a notch. Would I be willing to do that, knowing that my girl would be mocked, would be spit upon, would be flogged and ultimately tortured to a slow, cruel death? Would I be willing to do that to her for the sake of another? But let's ratchet that up one more time. Would I be willing to give one of my girls to be mocked, to be scoffed at, to be flogged and to be tortured to death for someone who has declared himself to be my enemy, someone who was a terrorist, at war with me? Would I be willing to do that? The answer is, "Absolutely not!" Never in a million years would I ever do that to one of my girls! I could not give one of my girls over to someone who would do that to her, who would ultimately torture her to death for the sake of someone who has declared himself to be my enemy. I absolutely, positively would never do that!

But God did...God did! It's easy to dismiss this and think somehow it's different with God and His Son—like He has no feelings. Every emotion, every feeling I have ultimately comes from God. My capacity to love my daughter and to protect my daughter comes from God. Whatever I feel towards my own child, God felt towards His Son times ten! The Bible says we were enemies of God. We were living in rebellion against God. We were terrorists against God, when God chose willingly to give up His own Son, that we might have life. Whatever you might question concerning God, the one thing that cannot reasonably be questioned is the love of God, because God's love is not religious theory. It was manifested; it was revealed; it was exposed to the world that, "This is how much I love you!" I understand that sometimes life gets really confusing. I understand sometimes that life breaks your heart. I understand that sometimes it feels like God is a million miles away and He doesn't care. Trust me, I have been there—I get that. But the one thing that cannot be reasonably questioned is God's love, because God put His love on display for the world to see. And if God so loves me and indwells me, then shouldn't I, as the child of God, love others as well? Verse 12:

**No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us His Spirit. We have seen and testified that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.** (Vs. 12-14)

This is a great text for the launching of the Advent season—a reminder that God gave His Son to be the Savior of the world. What does he mean when he says **No one has seen God at any time**? He makes the exact same statement in his gospel, chapter 1, immediately followed with the comment that Jesus came in order to manifest—or make known—God to the world. I think He's referring to the fact that no one has seen God in all of His glory. Moses asked for that in the Old Testament and God said, "*Moses, if you saw Me in all My glory, you would die.*" No one has seen God in all His glory, but Jesus came to earth in order to make God known and this God that so loved us **abides in us and we abide in Him**—and we experience His love. It's not that we loved *Him*. It's that He loved *us*. He actually gives us the capacity to love Him back. The whole cycle has to start with Him. He has given us His Spirit; He has given us His seed; He has given us His life that we might not only love God but, out of that, we might love one another.

He says it to the point that that's how the world will see God. That's the point he's trying to make. No one has seen God—it's not like God is wandering through the shopping mall this Christmas season. How do people know that the message of Christmas is not just religious fiction? There will be millions of people around the world that will celebrate Christmas that simply don't believe it! To them it's just kind of a warm, fuzzy feeling. What is the evidence on the table that this is actually true? The answer is: As God comes into us and transforms us and changes us from the

inside out, something radically has changed—and it gives evidence that this story is indeed true. Verse 15:

**Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.** (Vs. 15-16)

Now some of this feels like it's going in circles a little bit. But, in essence, what he's saying is: *when we confess Jesus as Savior, we receive the love of God. God gives us then the capacity to love Him back and the capacity to love others. He abides in us; we abide in Him; and through that the love of God is known—or experienced—in the world.* Verse 17:

**By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world.**

Because He abides in us and we abide in Him, when He returns, this will not be a day of fear; this will not be a day of condemnation. We should have confidence in that day, that when He comes back—and John has already talked about this—Jesus will be revealed for who He is. *The world shall see Him as He is, in all of His glory, and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess.* And about the time we have this magnificent picture of Jesus, we are reminded that John says, *And in that moment we, as His children, shall be like Him.* This is not a day to dread; this is a day to celebrate. If you think about the return of Christ and it fills your heart with panic or it fills your heart with dread, you've misunderstood something. He says in verse 18:

**There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.**

God does not motivate us by fear. Fear is what religion is made of. Religion is full of fear. It's full of this idea that if I step out of line, God's going to whack me and so I do this religious activity because that's what's expected; that's what's required. Religion is filled with the idea that God is in the heavens and He's angry and you have to appease Him and if you don't appease Him, He's going to whack you. If that's your image of God, you have completely misunderstood.

We as parents understand that fear and intimidation is a very effective way to motivate your children. This is one of the problems with it. It really works...for awhile. But you will ultimately pay a significant price for parenting that way. Religion parents through fear and intimidation. It creates an image of God—where we do what we do because we're afraid of God and we're afraid of the consequences. But God isn't like that! God motivates out of love. Even though the Bible is clear that there is a reality of Hell after death to those who reject Him, it's never a doctrine that is presented as the reason why you trust Christ as Savior. You don't trust Christ as Savior "...because it's sure better than going to Hell!" The message is always a message of love: ...because God loves us...because God gave up His life for us...because God invites us into the dance, He wants us to experience life as He intended it to be. It's always driven by love. God is not an angry boss that's coming back to earth and going to whack somebody. He's not an angry Father that's never satisfied with the behavior of His children. It's just the opposite. When He comes back it is going to be a beautiful, glorious reunion, and we should long for that day when we will see Him in all His glory and He will reveal us as magnificent trophies of His grace—that He has created from the inside out. Verse 19:

**We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.** (Vs. 19-21)

Again John is dealing with the false teachers who are saying they know God; they love God; they're enlightened by God; but their lives simply did not give any evidence. They were unloving; they were immoral. He's contrasting that with those who have believed the truth. Now the idea of God being invisible and people being visible carries this idea: How do you love God? It'd be easy for every single person in the room to say, "I love God." Okay, that's fine, but what does that mean? That's just kind of abstract talk. How do you love God who is invisible? By loving the people around us, who *are* visible. If you aren't loving the people around you, how do you love God? It's just empty talk. That's, in essence, what he's saying. If there isn't some evidence of the presence of God in you, of the love of God in you, in loving the people around you, how do you really love one who is invisible? There's no evidence of that; there's no manifestation of that.

Again I don't think John is saying to his readers, "You're a bunch of slackers! Get with it!" I think he is saying, "You need to look at these false teachers and their counterfeit Christianity. There simply is no evidence of God there." And then he's saying to the readers, "You need to look inside you. Something has really changed. There's something different about you. This is evidence that the message is actually true." The reminder in this text is, ultimately love comes from God. God is love. Therefore, to experience true community and to love without expectation, you must experience the love of God. This is really important to understand because I think a lot of people are trying to create community by doing an end-run *around* God. A lot of the people that seem the most desperate for community are people who are disgruntled with God, people who are angry with God, people who are frustrated with God, people who have distanced themselves from God. And they are, in essence, trying to do an end-run around God and trying to use some form of community to meet that God-need that their soul is longing for. That will never work. You can't experience community by doing an end-run around God. Ultimately you have to experience His love and it's the love of God that gives us the capacity to love Him back. It gives us the capacity to love the people around us. And when we love without expectation, we will experience the community we long for. Again I think the spirit of the text is not saying to the people, "Man, you need to get with it!" It is actually saying, "Hey, look inside of you! Something has really changed, which is evidence the message is really true."

In the spirit of that, I want to close the message by telling you: This Thanksgiving season, when I think about the things that I am most thankful for, toward the top of my list is *you*. This is an amazing place. I have never met so many people with so much love, with so much compassion, with so much kindness—people who every week are willing to alter their lifestyles in order to sacrifice of their time, sacrifice of their money, sacrifice of their talents and their energy for the sake of someone else. There is an army of several thousand people strong, that every week they lay it down; they put it out there for the sake of others on this campus, out in the community and around the world.

You say, "Well, what are we doing here? Is this kind of like a little pat on the back session?" That's not what I'm saying—that's not what I'm saying at all! According to the text, this is nothing *we've* done. It isn't that *we* loved. It's that *God* loved. And God gave us the capacity to love Him back. God sent His Son to be the propitiation—to be the payment—for sin. God removed the obstacle. God made it possible that we might know Him, that we might have His nature, that we

might have His seed, that we might have His Spirit, that we might have the capacity to love. But the fact of the matter is something has changed—and that is something we need to celebrate and it reminds us that the message is indeed true!

Now there are probably those among us that lean toward the cynical side of life. And immediately you think of all the bad examples of Christian love. If I wanted to write a best-selling book today, a best-selling Christian book, I simply need to write a book that slings mud at the Church. And I would have it—it would fly off the shelf; that’s very popular today. But it’s good to remind ourselves of a couple of things. If you want to criticize me, have at it. Do it all day long if it makes you feel better. But when you start slinging mud at my bride, I will probably stop that. I don’t believe Jesus feels any differently about His bride. The Church has never been perfect. The Church will never be perfect but, when you’re slinging mud at the Church, you’re slinging mud at the Bride of Christ, and I wouldn’t want to stand and defend that when I stand before Him.

The fact of the matter is: you can find a bad example of every belief system. If you want to find a bad example of a Christian, fine; you tell me what your belief system is; I’ll find you a bad example of that. We can play that game all day long but, for every one of those, there’s a hundred who are laying it down every week for the sake of the call—people who genuinely care. Something inside of us has changed. We’re not the same. I can no longer live my life as a selfish, greedy consumer and just care about myself. I just can’t. Something in me has changed. I can’t just turn away from the brokenness and the despair and the pain around me. I can’t just walk away. I can’t just be satisfied that we and our little family are happy while the rest of the world is in despair and in hopelessness. I can’t ignore that; I can’t walk away from it. Something inside me has changed. That’s the essence of the gospel: God has changed us. We are a gathering of people who are no longer satisfied being selfish, greedy consumers, to waste our lives away. We look at the world around us and we’re dissatisfied with the way it is. We understand God’s vision for the world and this isn’t it! We can’t just walk away; we can’t just turn our backs; we can’t just do our own thing. Something inside of us has changed. And so every week there are people that actually alter their lifestyles in order to generously give away their money, generously give away their time, generously give away their talent and their energy for the sake of someone else. This room is filled with people that tomorrow morning will wake up and go to work and genuinely care about the people they work with. They genuinely care about the untouchables and the unlovables. They’re not willing to just walk away, as if those people don’t matter. There are students who walk through the halls of their schools and they genuinely care about their fellow students, and they genuinely care that their fellow students would find that which gives life meaning. And all of that is an evidence that something deep inside has changed.

John’s argument is: If the message is true, something inside should have changed. There should be a sense in which we experience God’s love. We have a new capacity for love and we’re no longer satisfied with being selfish, greedy consumers anymore. If you were to ask me, “What is the evidence on the table that this message really is true?” my answer would be, “I think the evidence on the table is overwhelming—of thousands of people whose lives have been radically changed and give evidence of that every day.” God calls us to love without expectation and, in so doing, we unknowingly create the community that our souls are longing for.

*Our Father, we're thankful this morning that You love us. Lord, this isn't really a story about us; this is a story about You. It isn't that we loved You; You loved us. But in loving us and saving us, You have changed us. You have given us a new capacity to love You and to love those around You. Lord, this is the evidence that the message we proclaim is true, because it has changed us. Lord, for that we're thankful and we celebrate. Lord, I pray this Christmas season that the truth of the message might be evident as we love those that You have brought into our lives, in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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## **God Is Love**

### *Cultivating Authentic Christian Community: A Study in 1 John*

1 John 4:7-21

Bryan Clark

### **Opening Discussion**

1. What is the difference between viewing community as a program or activity and understanding community as a value or a way of life?
2. Discuss this statement: “People who only dream of community usually destroy it, but those who love people without expectation unknowingly create it.” Hugh Halter
3. If it’s true that God is love is it also true that love is God? Why or why not?

### **Bible Study**

1. What is the correct definition of love according to the Bible? Is it a feeling or something else?

Read and summarize the first two passages on love in 1 John.

1 John 2:7-17:

1 John 3:13-24:

2. What does John say about how we have been loved by God in 4:7-11? Compare with the following verses from John’s Gospel: John 3:16; 13:34,35; 14:12,13

Without a doubt life can be confusing and at times extremely painful, but can we really question the love of God given what God has done for us?

3. Read 4:12-16. Francis Schaffer once said, “Christian love is our best apologetic.” Do you believe this is true? What does this mean in practical terms? What is the best way to convince people around us that God is real and that He dwells in us?
4. Read 4:17-19. What is the relationship between love and fear?

In what ways can fear motivate our obedience to Christ? Is this good or bad? Why?

5. Read 4:20-21. Do we really know God if we don’t love others? Why or why not?

## **Application**

1. Is John saying if we call ourselves Christians we should try harder to love others or is he saying something more? If more, what is he saying?
2. Is authentic community going to be found by going out and trying to create it or by abiding in God and knowing Him deeply? If “fellowship” is sharing in common how can you share something you don’t have?
3. Go back and revisit your discussion from the “Opening Discussion” section question #2. What will be necessary for you to experience true community?