

“...Because He First Loved US!”

1 John 4:7-21

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There's an old joke about a man who returns home after a long, hard day at the office. He's surprised as he walks through the door to see the lights turned down low, soft music coming from the stereo, candles lit on the dining room table, and the air filled with the aroma of pot roast baking in the oven. His wife helps remove his hat and coat from him and leads him over to the dining room table where his favorite drink now awaits him. After taking his seat, his wife stands behind him, rubbing his shoulders, at which point she asks him this deeply concerning question, "Honey, do you love me?" "Of course, I do, dear" he responds. "Honey, would you die for me?" The husband thinks for a second and then responds, "No, mine is an undying love."

Well last Sunday, we honored veterans for their service and sacrifice. In my sermon, I focused in on the enduring nature of "dying" love as we examined Jesus' statement to his disciples, how "greater love has no man (or woman) than he (or she) who lays down his life for another," a message he delivers on the eve of his impending arrest and crucifixion. For Jesus, there is only ONE kind of love that will suffice in God's kingdom and it can only be SELFLESS and SACRIFICIAL love, the SAME kind of love he was prepared to demonstrate HIMSELF on behalf of the world, and that included his ENEMIES, as well. I then ended my sermon by referring to Whitney Houston's popular hit "The Greatest Love of All" in which she sings that such love is found INSIDE ourselves and that it all begins by learning to TAP that love. I remarked that as much as I appreciate the song, I strongly differed because my faith teaches me that the BASIS of such love is to be found NOT WITHIN us but rather OUTSIDE of us, in a relationship with one who imparts to us HIS very own courage and strength, one who EVEN WHEN FEARS ARISE, calms them with the command "Peace, be still." And furthermore, that such love does not originate by loving oneself first but rather, WITH HIM WHO FIRST LOVED US. This morning, I want to follow up that discussion and talk further about a love that begins, not when we FIRST LOVE OURSELVES but when we discover that we are LOVED FIRST, even when we feel WORTHLESS AND UNDESERVING inside.

Arguably, the two greatest passages in all the Bible which help explain the nature and blessedness of love are 1 Corinthians 13--the Apostle Paul's famous "love chapter"--and this morning's text from the disciple John- 1 John 4:7-21. The word "love" appears in one form or another some twenty-nine times within the span of just fifteen verses. These verses can be divided into two parts with the first part presenting a comprehensive treatment of the nature of TRUE love, and the second part where he sets forth the results of this love in the life of the believer. When he asserts in v.8 that one who does not love does not, in fact, KNOW God for "God is love," God is defined for the very first time, NOT as UNIVERSAL REASON, not as some PRINCIPLE OF COSMIC ORDER as the Greeks believed, NOT as NATURE OR BEAUTY OR GOODNESS, NOR as some MYSTICAL GROUND WHICH SERVES AS THE SOURCE OF ALL BEING. Rather, for the first time in human history, God is defined as "UNCONDITIONAL LOVE" and NO OTHER religion in the world has ever begun with just such a sublime premise.

Furthermore, this love is not some intellectual abstraction for philosophers to debate and discuss like all other philosophical concepts, but is foremost an ACTION- one that is directed towards REAL people in ACTUAL situations. Love is the language with which God speaks to this world and it makes its FULLEST expression in the activity of God sending his only-begotten son to die for us. Jesus Christ becomes the ULTIMATE model or exemplar of this love by voluntarily laying down his life “like a lamb led to the slaughter” that we might regain that same intimate and personal relationship HE enjoyed with the Father: “He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf in order that we might become sinless even as HE was.” It was a love he continually showed through his prayers and his tears, his labors and his sufferings, and ULTIMATELY by his willingness to go to the cross on behalf of those who put him to death in the FIRST place. You tell me, WHERE in the story of humankind has a deeper and more abiding love ever been described or demonstrated?

But, the FLIPSIDE to all this is that as God loves US, so are WE to love ONE ANOTHER. For John, it is as important for us TO love as it is for us to BE loved. The principle he lays down here is this- that we obtain love only by GIVING it away, for it is only by LOVING OTHERS that we will then FIND LOVE and, in the process, discover the God who LOVED US FIRST. I repeat, that we obtain love only by giving it away, for it is only by loving others that we will find love and, in the process, discover the God who loved us first. Those who are truly God’s children will reflect in their lives something of that love with which he has loved THEM. The bottom line for John is this, that in order to understand what God’s love is all about, it is essential that we live out that love OURSELVES by directing it towards OTHER PEOPLE- otherwise, he insists WE DON’T KNOW LOVE and WE CERTAINLY DON’T KNOW GOD.

Of course, the reality is that it is so much harder to love OTHER PEOPLE than it is to love GOD. If you were to ask me whether I love God, my initial response would be, “CERTAINLY I love God. That’s the reason I became a minister in the FIRST PLACE, in order to tell others about Jesus Christ and his love! Why would you even ask me such a dumb question?” But then if you ask me, “Well then, do you love your neighbor or even the stranger in your midst? Do you love the drunkard? Do you love the drug addict? Do you love the stinky, homeless panhandler who stands there begging for any assistance at an intersection stoplight?” I perhaps might hesitate some before giving you a straight answer. And if you were to take this line of questioning even FURTHER- “Do you love the wife beater? Do you love the pedophile who molests innocent children? Or how about those Muslim terrorists who are trying to kill American soldiers?” I would have to honestly and reluctantly admit “I really DON’T love as Jesus did and as God loves us.” You see, it’s easy to love God and people in the abstract but when we are asked to love the same in the CONCRETE, it becomes another issue ENTIRELY.

But of course, I know you know all this already. What I’ve been saying about God’s love for the past couple of minutes you’ve undoubtedly heard from out of the mouths of numerous preachers over the years. YES, God IS love, and YES, Jesus IS the perfect personification of that love, and YES, we ARE commanded to love others even as he loved us. You’ve read these words a thousand times in your own Bibles, you’ve heard them proclaimed throughout hundreds of sermons, you’ve sung about them in the Church’s hymns, and you’ve recited them over and over again in our ancient creeds and confessions. But there is still ONE MORE point I would like to add which if not properly understood, undermines everything I just said and what you thought you knew about the love of God.

Within our lesson this morning, we are told that we are ABLE to love others ONLY because God first loved US, that any love on OUR part is always a RESPONSE to what God has ALREADY done on our behalf and NOT as a means of EARNING his love. This point is SO important that John has to repeat it AGAIN in the very same passage. In v.10, he writes, “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins,” the gist of which he repeats in v.19, “We love, because he first loved us.” It is impossible to understand, not just the nature of God and his love, but what it means to be a CHRISTIAN and to lead a REAL CHRISTIAN LIFE without first grasping the importance of this truth. In it lies the ESSENCE OF ALL GRACE AND FORGIVENESS, the fact that God’s activity on our behalf and in our lives begins and ends with GOD taking the initial step followed by OUR RESPONSE of love and gratitude for it. It’s always about GOD’S efforts and never our own.

Mark Galli is the editor of *Christianity Today*, one of America’s top religious journals and a magazine I’ve subscribed to for close to half a century. Not long ago, he wrote an article in which he asked the question, “Whatever happened to grace?” In it, he stated that he believes there is a CRISIS OF GRACE in our day and age, that the reason so many people are LEAVING churches rather than ENTERING them is that our message has become increasingly moralistic and legalistic without even realizing it. To prove his point, he shared three experiences he had. The FIRST was at a Texas megachurch that was baptizing 200 people in a single morning. A few of the candidates for baptism were interviewed by the pastor on stage. After the candidate offered his testimony of his new life in Christ, the pastor asked if he believed that baptism saves us. The answer he was prompted to give was of course “no.” Then he asked the candidate what DOES save us, and this time the prompted answer was “OUR faith in Jesus as God incarnate and/or our trust in his sufficient death on the cross.” Galli found that the answers were FORMALLY correct, but the explanation of faith described by the candidate was essentially A NEW FORM OF WORKS. According to him, we weren’t so much saved by Christ as by our MENTAL ASSENT or INTELLECTUAL ADHERENCE to a few theological propositions. It was similar to when I was a young Christian, I was convinced all you had to do was get someone to simply mouth what is called “the four spiritual laws,” that is, to get someone to admit he or she was a sinner and needed Jesus Christ to save them, and then they were automatically given a free pass into heaven. Well, that might be theologically correct up to a point but that is certainly not “faith” or at least the kind of faith JESUS demanded of others.

Galli then attended ANOTHER CHURCH where the message was grounded in those words of Paul to the church in Galatia: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself to me.”(Gal. 2:20) He said the service went pretty well until they got to the end and the preacher said, “Have you EXPERIENCED grace?” He was implying that we were not saved by faith in what Christ accomplished but by a certain type of religious feeling we might have. Again, it was like a lot of those Pentecostal services I attended as a young man where the preacher would stand before the congregation and bellow, “DO YOU FEEL SAVED THIS MORNING!” On the contrary, “salvation”--in the biblical sense--does not depend upon how a person “FEELS” REGARDLESS how sublime that experience may be as ALL emotions are fleeting and they come and go as indeterminately as the wind.

Galli’s THIRD experience was an encounter with a professor at a Christian university. They were talking about the relationship of grace and good works. At one point, he said, “We are saved by grace, yes, but after that, the Christian life is mostly about OUR EFFORTS to live a

Christ-like life.” The author went on to relate how all three of these anecdotes were representative of what he, as the editor of one of the nation’s best known Christian magazines, hears all-too frequently- a lack of understanding OR appreciation of what REAL grace is all about. Our status as children of God is NOT dependent on whether we adhere to correct theology (whatever THAT is), NOT because of a particular feeling we might have, and certainly NOT because we spend most of our time praying, reading the Bible, and going to church on Sundays. What Galli sees is more and more ministers AND EVEN PROFESSORS preaching a message of dull works instead of THE SOARING MESSAGE OF GOD’S GRACE- a message that begins and ends with God’s continual offer of love to us from the beginning of our Christian life to the end; the message that God redeems us and translates us into his heavenly family even while we are resisting him with all our heart and all our soul; the knowledge that even while we turn our backs on God and adamantly vow that our answer is “NO,” God is STILL saying “YES, YES” to us, insisting that we ARE AND ALWAYS WILL BE his child whether we REALIZE IT or NOT! And Galli is ALSO convinced that if we recover that message, the current mass exodus of Christians from our pews just may be reversed. People are starved for the kind of forgiveness and love the Bible speaks about- one that says WHILE WE WERE YET SINNERS, with our hearts far from God, CHRIST DIED FOR US (Rom. 5:8), and before we had ever done ANYTHING, God was in Christ RECONCILING THE WORLD TO HIMSELF (1 Cor. 5:19).

When God first loves us, we are unlovely and unloving, unworthy to be loved by such a holy God. Yet, God loves us all the same and MAKES US HIS CHILDREN BY INCORPORATING US INTO HIS HOLY FAMILY, as unloving and unworthy as we may be. You see, the activity of God ALWAYS precedes any activity on OUR part. This tenet of our faith is SO important I feel I must repeat it AGAIN- the activity of God ALWAYS precedes any activity on OUR part, the implications of which are ASTOUNDING. For instance, it is a common assumption, one found even in the most popular theological books, that repentance must precede forgiveness, that before God accepts our pleas of contrition or before we should ever forgive someone else, that person must first get down on his or her knees, admit he or she is sorry, and then ask for forgiveness. Only THEN can the person expect to receive any kind of mercy. Unfortunately, this is not only bad theology, it is particularly BAD CHRISTIAN theology. The problem is that it is MORALISTIC and makes our forgiveness CONTINGENT UPON OUR GOOD DEEDS. If we must first repent, then God’s mercy is not really all that merciful. It makes God’s offer of forgiveness dependent upon the prior act of us feeling sorry for our actions and the promise we won’t do it again, yet nothing could be more self-defeating.

The fact is that we repent, not in order TO BE forgiven but because we have ALREADY BEEN forgiven. In Mark, Jesus approaches the paralytic and tells him to the great astonishment of both his disciples and the religious leaders that his sins are forgiven. However, the man had come to Jesus in the FIRST place, not because he was REPENTING of his sins but because he wanted Jesus to HEAL him. Likewise, in John’s account of the woman caught in adultery, Jesus tells her that her sins are forgiven, and THEN he instructs her to go and sin no more. Her new freedom that enabled her to “go and sin no more” was conditional upon her FORGIVENESS and NOT her REPENTANCE. Because Jesus has ALREADY forgiven her, she is now freed to alter her behavior and NOT that she must change before Jesus forgives her. And of course the SUPREME example that “forgiveness is prior to repentance” is found in Christ’s own words from the cross. He asks God to forgive the very ones who are crucifying him, not because they have repented and begged his mercy but because he wants to break the cycle of vengeance they

are caught up in. Had he cursed them instead, the cycle of rage, hatred followed by vengeance would have continued. Repentance is always a RESULT of God taking the initiative in forgiving us first—REGARDLESS how far our hearts and lives may be from him--and not the CAUSE of it. Only THEN can reconciliation between persons take place.

True to the saying "old habits die hard," nothing is HARDER than trying to reform oneself, to change ingrained patterns, to abandon habits that for years have given us so much pleasure- just ask an alcoholic or drug addict or person addicted to sex. Yet, when we receive God's forgiveness and mercy, he ALSO gives us the motivation and the power to develop NEW habits, NEW lifestyles that God finds pleasing. However, God does not require that we first give up all those activities that need forgiving as a PRECONDITION to receiving his mercy. God does not insist that we first mend our ways, abandon those lifelong habits, die to self, and only THEN will we ever find forgiveness. Rather, God's forgiveness ALWAYS precedes repentance, grace ALWAYS goes before holiness. The truth is that IN SPITE OF our disobedience, IN SPITE OF all our wickedness and hardness of heart, you and I are ALREADY children of God and loved for all eternity and NOTHING, NO NOTHING, CAN or EVER WILL alter that fact.

You see, what makes God "gracious" in the FIRST place is that he first comes to US, that he accepts US just as we are- dirty, selfish, greedy, proud, full of addictions- that he loves us, forgives us, and desires to break the chain of old habits and illicit desires that have bound us for years. We can never earn this love; we can never work for his forgiveness or improve upon what he has already done for us- we can only RECEIVE it as freely as he has OFFERED it to us. And if we DO step out in faith and believe that through Christ, we have ALREADY been forgiven and reconciled to God, have ALREADY been made members of his own family, we will then begin to see new life replace the old, each of us transformed by the mercy of God, by a reality we did not create or even ask for.

Friends, THAT is what Christian faith is all about. It is simply reminding ourselves of God's assurance of pardon, reminding ourselves that we are ALREADY accepted by him, that we are ALREADY forgiven, that we have ALREADY become God's children and heirs of an imperishable inheritance, that we are, in fact, made new- AND NOT FOR ANYTHING WE MAY HAVE DONE. We may not FEEL like we're new; we may not LOOK like we're new; we may not even LIVE like we're new persons, but if this is PRECISELY how God regards us, then we must regard it as true OURSELVES, that we are ALREADY saved and sealed with the promise that we are members of God's family and nothing will ever separate us from either his presence or his love. We did not EARN it; we did not WORK for it, and we could not IMPROVE upon it. We probably weren't even LOOKING for God or anything that even APPROXIMATED such love! Yet, when the offer came, we could only ACCEPT it- as a free gift from God. "In this is love, not that WE LOVED GOD but that HE LOVED US and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins," and as a result, we are now able to love and accept others at their worst and love even OURSELVES at our most loveless- all because he CONTINUES to love us FIRST. Let us pray...

*Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, help us to grasp the simple truth that you have always loved us and will never stop loving us even when we remain unloving and unlovable. Where we will forget you, reject you, and even curse you, you never once closed your heart to us. Help us to recognize the gift you extend to us, especially in the life and work of Jesus, that we might run to you and henceforth lead lives filled with gratitude in return. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*