

STUDY GUIDE & DAILY READINGS

Sunday, March 22, 2009

Radical Renovation (*Week 4 of 7*)

Love: The Radical Center

1 John 4:7-12

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 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. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Mark 12:28-34

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

"The most important one" answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

The Word from the Bible, New International Version

Love Defined

Love, says John, is something that comes from God. As such, we are not dealing with emotions, sexual feelings, warmth toward others or human bonding. When it comes to love, we are dealing with something other than our affections. Gordon Clark calls it "a settled decision to obey God's laws." Love's outcome is "compassion and benevolence." John encourages us to love, and if we truly are a follower of Jesus, then we will aim at love. If we are a fraud, we will ignore the call to love.

The example of Christ

Love is shaped by the image of Christ's sacrifice. At the practical level, the image of Jesus' washing the feet of the disciples shows us the application of love, of active compassion. When it comes to the motivation of love, certainly Christ's love for us motivates us to love. The renewing work of the Holy Spirit shapes love within us. Yet there is a greater motivation to love, for it is in loving one another that we actually touch the being of God. John wrote, "**No one has ever seen God,**" yet as we love each other, it is possible to experience the presence of God. In love, we touch him; in loving, he touches us.

1 John 4:7-12 – Love is an action

Leading up to chapter 4, John has developed this letter around the statement "**God is light.**" He has repeatedly said that the truth of God and knowledge of God cannot be separated from the character of daily living in obedience to God's commandments. Now he turns his attention to the statement "**God is love.**" All he has said about truth is now said about love. Christian belief and Christian life cannot be separated. As one believes, so one lives. Love is an action.

God loved first. God sent his Son to atone for our sins, to be our Savior. If we believe in him, confess him, and show our love for him by loving our neighbor, we may confidently face the coming **judgment** without **fear**. To live in love is to live victoriously over all failure and all anxiety.

Love overcomes the external punishment of the world and the internal fear of the heart. Faith overcomes falsehoods, lies, inner doubts and secular challenge. Only in verse 4 do we find John using the noun "**faith**." Everywhere else (in the gospel of John, all three letters and Revelation) John uses the related verb "**believe**" or "**have faith**." For John, "**faith**" is an action that is defined by love.

Christianity is much more than a system of belief or the knowledge of a revealed doctrine — though those are important to John also. Christianity is right belief about God's revelation in Christ. Our deepest convictions about God's relation to us and the world are revealed in action. Faith is grounded in our witness to God. Our witness is grounded in an active love shown to God through others.

God's love for us – Our love for each other

In exploring the relationship between God's love for us and our love for each other, John makes two statements: **love comes from God** (v. 7), and **God is love** (v. 8). The statement God is love is often beyond our human experience. How does God love the unlovable? Substitute the name of anyone you know — your mother, pastor, friend, a well-known Christian or hero of the faith or even yourself — for "God." Very few people can be characterized simply by the word love. We may know a loving person. On occasion, they may show us what mature, self-giving, genuine love is like. No matter how full, rich and steadfast their love, the statement "... is loving," can never be changed into "... is love."

Because God is love, love comes from God. God is the source of love. When John encourages his readers, **let us love one another**, he is encouraging them to allow God's love to flow through them. God is love. When we claim to be followers of God, then love must characterize those who claim to be born of God or know God (v. 7; 3:10, 14; 4:20-21). Those who claim to be doing the will of God and reflecting God's activity in the world will be known by the love they manifest for God and for each other.

John is so confident that the Christian community will fulfill the command "**to love one another**" that he writes that mutual Christian love manifests the presence and action of the invisible God (v. 12). When he writes **no one has ever seen God**, he calls to mind the same statement in the Gospel of John (1:18). In both cases, he is not trying to tell us what God is like but how God is known. God is known not only in the revelation that comes to us in Jesus (John 1:18) but also by the manifestation of our love for each other (1 John 4:12).

The love of a follower of Christ makes evident and concrete the activity of God among them. In fact, when John writes that this is how love is made complete, he means that it reaches its intended goal when it flows from God, through us, to others. The love with which God loved us must in turn be extended to all.

Discussion Questions

Use these questions at home with your family or as a means to reflect on today's message.

1. What does the word Love mean to you? Is it something you feel or something you do?
Explain your reasoning.
2. What difference does it make for you to define love not by what you do, but by what God has done in Christ?
3. How have you experienced God's love in your life?
4. How have you demonstrated the love of God in your actions?
5. Who do you know who models loving God and loving others in their actions? Describe this person or these persons.

Notes

Daily Readings

Please note: We began 2009 by focusing our attention on the gospel of Mark. We have come now to the resurrection of Jesus. Instead of continuing in Mark's gospel, we are going to shift to the crucifixion and death passages in the other gospels to prepare us for Holy Week. This week, we focus on Matthew's account of the crucifixion and death of Jesus and then turn to Luke and John for the next two weeks. On Easter we will focus for four weeks on the resurrection of Jesus. Beginning in May, we will read through the book of Acts.

Monday, March 23 – Read Matthew 26:36-56. Matthew shares with us Jesus' agony as he prays three times to be released from the trial of his suffering. It is difficult to know whether Jesus' struggle is over his impending suffering or over the weakness of his disciples. In either case, we see the divine Jesus' realization that the only hope for humanity lies in his death and resurrection. As you reflect on your own life and faith, how would you respond to the call of Christ to stay awake one hour? In what ways do you compromise your faith?

Tuesday, March 24 – Read Matthew 26:57-27:2. The betrayal of Jesus by Judas is only the beginning of the treachery leveled at Jesus. The Jewish High Court assembles a false case against Jesus. Roman law restricted the Jewish Council from carrying out a death sentence, so they delivered him to Pilate, the Roman governor, to carry out death by crucifixion. As the crowd gathers to witness the scourging of Jesus, Peter saves himself by denying Jesus. How many times have you stood silent when your faith has been challenged? Will you confess these to God and ask forgiveness?

Wednesday, March 25 – Read Matthew 27:3-26. Judas realizes how grievous his actions were and tries to return the money he received for betraying Jesus. His guilt is extreme, resulting in his suicide and gruesome death as portrayed by Acts 1:16-20. Pilate passes the blame of Jesus' death to the crowd by unsuccessfully offering the criminal Barabbas to the crowd in exchange. Clearly, everyone shares in the blame of Jesus' death. In what ways do you share in the crucifixion of Christ? God is ready to offer forgiveness and love for whatever we have done.

Thursday, March 26 – Read Matthew 27:27-44. Silently and without resistance, Jesus takes the mocking brutality of the soldiers charged with carrying out the execution. Can you identify times in your life when Jesus might have stood silent as your actions caused harm to the ways of God? Offer these times to God in prayer.

Friday, March 20 – Read Matthew 27:45-66. The words of Jesus in verse 46 are the opening words from Psalm 22. After reading Psalm 22, we realize that the words from Jesus that seem to be words of defeat are instead a call to victory. The soldiers who just hours before are mocking Jesus are now praising him as God's son. Can you identify times in your life when you saw evidence of Christ? How did you feel? What are you willing to do about these realizations?