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WAY BETTER THAN A MOVIE

1 John 4:7-12

When my kids were in their teens on more than one occasion when they were out with friends at night looking for something to do, they drove out into the back country to an area where a cult was located. It was a dark, rural area, that at night could feel pretty creepy. They used to go out there specifically to be scared. What is the lure of being scared? The number of horror and suspense movies that are made with the specific intent of scaring viewers suggests that its attraction is very real. I imagine some psychologist somewhere has a theory about why that is appealing, but I have my own pet theory. I have no evidence for this, but I suspect there are two elements that create the appeal of being scared. One is that what people really desire is awe, specifically a spine tingling awe of God that is a distant cousin of being scared. But the other element is that we all want to feel something. Feeling nothing is numbness, it is not being alive. We feel more alive when we actually feel something, so feeling frightened can make us feel a little more alive.

Whatever the case, I was interested when I encountered a quote from seminary professor Rod Cooper that reminded me of my children’s forays into the spooky nights of the past. Cooper grew up in rural Ohio where there wasn’t much for kids to do. One of the things he and his friends did was to hunt for haunted houses at night. Apparently living in an area where there is a lot to do, like here, ends up being not all that different for teens from living in a place where there is not. Anyway, he describes finding such a house down a narrow dirt lane. They would get out of the car in pitch blackness and could hear the spooky hooting of an owl as well as the breeze whispering through the trees. Here’s how he describes the scene. “The house would be just like you would imagine, a dark, gray, imposing figure with windows broken out and the shutters falling off. The broken picket fence had a squeaky gate that swung lazily back and forth. We’d go into the house and turn on the flashlight. If you were to reach out and touch us at that moment you’d have had to peel us off the ceiling. Every step was one of caution. Every step was one of concern. Every step was one of worry because we didn’t know what was waiting for us around the corner.” Cooper then said that’s how many of us live our lives, filled with caution, concern, worry. Our lives become haunted houses, the farthest thing from green pastures beside quiet waters.

Part of that is because there is a lot to fear in this world. But another part of the unease and the anxiety that plagues us, is a result of another dynamic that is going on inside all of us.

All of us have a sense that something isn’t quite right with us. We have a nagging sense that something is wrong with us. It may just be a vague unease in quiet moments, but it is there. We know that we are not what we ought to be. All of us have a part of us we hide because we know it is not admirable and good. We have some measure of guilt because we know that we don’t measure up to what we should be. This is exacerbated by the sense that we are going to be held accountable. We sense that people ought to experience the consequences of their choices and their character. If there is indeed something wrong with us, if we don’t measure up, this does not bode well for us.

This creates a tendency that is nearly irresistible. That is the tendency to somehow prove that we do measure up, that there is nothing wrong with us. We have this life long crusade to convince ourselves and others that all is right with us.

We learn early on how things work in this world, and as we progress through life we experience countless instances that reinforce the lesson. Our grandson, Wesley, is already picking up on how the system works. He has learned that if he covers his eyes with his hands, then quickly uncovers them people say, “Peekaboo.” Then they cheer his achievement saying, “Yay, Wesley” and clap for him. Then he claps for himself and repeats the action because he gets applause. It feels good to him. He is learning to do things that gain approval. This is happening at 1 year old, and as he grows he will see it over and over in life. We all do. Gaining approval feels huge to us. It is such a powerful motivation because we carry around that sense that somehow we aren’t quite right, and we hope and think that if we get enough approval we will start to feel like maybe we are all right.

As we grow up we learn that those who behave well in class and get good grades get approval. We see that the people on the sports teams who perform the best get the most notice and approval. Those who are the most talented in music or at work or are the most beautiful get the notice and approval so we pursue these things. We feel this great internal pressure to be better. Sadly, no matter how much we try to do better, no matter how much we achieve, no matter how much approval we get, the fear of not measuring up never quite goes away.

Our world today tells us that we just need to accept ourselves, and that we are beautiful just as we are. But it doesn’t work because every day life hands us doses of reality that loudly proclaim that it’s not true. We try to cover up our flaws and failures and create an image that is better than we know we really are. We put up a front, but that just makes the problem worse because now we know that we are adding phoniness and dishonesty to the failures. We get very sensitive to anyone or anything that might show our failure or expose our hypocrisy. This makes God a terrible threat because he can see it all and he knows the truth about us. We can’t hide it from him.

All of this tends to create in us a swamp of stress as we try to be and do better. No matter how much better we do, it is never quite enough and this piles up discouragement, guilt, anger, frustration, weariness, restlessness, depression and even hopelessness. This is not the life God designed us to live. It is not the life we want for ourselves. It is not how we want to feel or to live. A common way of dealing with this is to try to medicate it through the use of alcohol or drugs so we can just feel better. That’s why drugs and alcohol use have been so prevalent throughout history and continue to be today. But that only makes the problem worse. What can help us? How can we find real peace? John reveals an absolutely crucial truth in 1 John 4:7-12, one that holds the key to resolving our dilemma.

GOD IS LOVE

The heart of this passage and one of John’s main messages is found in verse 8. God is love. John thought this was such an important truth that he repeats it down in verse 16. This is a message we would not know by looking at the world around us. Yes, there are many evidences of the love and goodness of God that we can see. But if all I had to go on was what I see in the world, I don’t think I’d conclude God is love. Have you ever paid attention to what happens in nature? It’s brutal. Laurie and I were taking a walk not long ago and we saw a hawk circling near us, obviously hunting. At one point he swept down and when he flew back up he had some small animal gripped in his talons. That poor little creature was just going about his business when all of a sudden out of nowhere, boom, he became lunch. It was a reminder that nature is brutal. It is violent and filled with sudden disaster. While I can see that Laurie and I have been blessed in many ways, we also watched one of our three children suffer and die. That didn’t feel very loving. We learned this year that a dear friend, one of the most positive and lively people we’ve ever known, one who is younger than me, is suffering from Alzheimer’s and is doing very poorly. The situation is hearbreaking, and it sure doesn’t shout that God is love. Life is full of pain and loss. So it is not obvious that God is love.

We only know that God is love because God has revealed that truth through people like John, and, as we will see, through Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection. But what does John mean when he says God is love? In what way is God love?

***Love is defined by God***

We use the term “love” in many different ways. There are a lot of ideas about what love actually is. We’ve just come through the Christmas season when a lot of people watch Hallmark movies. Somewhere in all those movies one character said to another, “I’m falling in love with you.” That depicts love as something that happens to us, something we don’t control. But if that’s true, then verse 7 presents a logical problem for us. It *commands* us, “Let us love one another.” It tells us to choose to love. But if love is something that happens to us we can’t choose it. Either it happens or it doesn’t, but we don’t control it. Think of the difference between two statements. The first is, “Oh, no, I’ve got covid 19.” The second is “I just got the covid 19 vaccination.” Both involve something that might happen to us, but the first is something that might have happened to me that I didn’t choose, while the second is something I chose.

John had a very different idea about what love is. He believed and taught that we do choose it. So this love is a different creature than whatever Hallmark sent our way. John meant that if you want to know what love is, real love, look at God. Love is an essential part of his character. This is so true that he epitomizes love.

I once heard a woman say of another woman whom she admired, “She is kindness itself.” She felt this other person was the embodiment of kindness. That is what John says about God. He is the prime example of love. If you want to know if something is love, compare it with God. If it matches up then that action or attitude, is love, but if they don’t match, then whatever it is, it is not love.

In verses 9-10 John shows us how God perfectly depicts 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.” He doesn’t show his love by making our lives a gentle stroll on a bed of roses. He showed it by sending his son to rescue us.

This is God’s love. He didn’t wait for us to love him and then responded back to us. He didn’t play, “Let’s make a deal,” saying “if you will do these things for me, I will love you.” He didn’t just say he loved us and wanted the best for us, but then said it was up to us to fix our problems. He acted. He sacrificed. He pursued good for us at a cost to himself that can never be calculated or comprehended. There was no limit to how much he loves us and how much he was willing to give up in order to bring about our good. Even when human beings rejected him, he continued to love and do good for us.

This is real love. It is giving, it is unconditional, it is unending, it is sacrificial. It is focused on the one loved, not on self. That’s how God loves us. We are the people who have completely lost our minds and are impossible to love, but God has never and will never stop loving us, no matter what. In his book, *The Difficult Doctrine Of The Love Of God*, scholar D. A. Carson depicts a young man and young woman walking on the beach. The young man turns to the woman and says, “I love you.” What does he mean? In our culture it likely means he wants her to go to bed with him. But let’s assume a higher motive. He likely means something along the lines of, “You mean everything to me. I can’t live without you. Your sparkling good humor, your beautiful eyes, the scent of your hair, everything about you transfixes me. I love you.” Carson says what it certainly does not mean is, “You have such a bad case of halitosis it would embarrass a herd of unwashed garlic eating elephants. Your nose is so bulbous it belongs in a cartoon. Your hair is so greasy it could lubricate an 18 wheeler. Your personality makes Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan look like wimps. But I love you.”

When God says he loves us he is not saying everything about us transfixes him. Our personality, our beauty, our sparkling conversation, our smile powerfully draws him to us. Clearly we must be pretty wonderful because God loves us. No, that’s not what he’s saying. Carson wrote that he is saying, “Morally speaking, you are the people of the halitosis, the bulbous nose, the greasy hair, the abominable personality. Your sins have made you disgustingly ugly. But I love you anyway, not because you are attractive, but because it is my nature to love.”

This is love, God’s love. It is love that gives and sacrifices, and continues doing so despite the fact that the object of love is utterly undeserving of it. Nothing can stop this love. As Paul wrote, nothing can ever separate us from God’s love.

***Love drives God***

God is love means that while there is more to God than love, love is behind everything that he is and does. Everything he does is motivated by love. When he created the cosmos, he did so because of love. When he exiled Adam and Eve from Eden he did so because of love. When he chose Israel to be his people it was because of love. When he created you and me he did so because of love. When Jesus went to the cross it was because of love. When he rose from the dead it was because of love.

How do we know that? In 1 Corinthians 13:1 Paul wrote, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol.” Paul would go on to say a person could do incredible, mind-blowing things, even work astounding miracles, but if the motive behind those actions was not love, they are nothing. They are that resounding gong. A current way of saying that is they are like that hideous alarm that blares at the airport when a person opens a door in the terminal that they are not supposed to. They are a car alarm going off at 3 in the morning. If love isn’t the motive, then whatever they do, it is not great, it’s nothing, it’s just annoying.

Does that apply to God? Yes, it does. It is his truth. That means if God ever does anything with a motive other than love, then he is that blaring, piercing alarm. He is nothing but a horrible annoyance. That tells you that everything God does is motivated by love.

But God allows so much evil in this world. Are you telling me that his motive in allowing the corona virus pandemic is love? How does that work? How do you explain that to our friends who have lost beloved parents to this miserable disease? I don’t want to give you a canned answer, but there actually is an answer, though it requires some thought. According to the Bible, why do things like the corona virus exist? All the suffering in the world, including this pandemic, ultimately are a result of choices made by human beings way back in the Garden of Eden. They chose evil, and this is the result. Why did God let them choose evil? Why does he continue to let people make that choice every day? Because the only way he could love them was to give them freedom. Because he loves them and wants a love relationship with them, he let them choose, and their choice caused untold suffering. God continues to let people choose, even though their choices result in pain and suffering. He does that because his motive is always to love.

***Love Is Derived From God***

Notice that phrase at the end of verse 7. “Love is from God.” John is telling us that God is the source of all love. He is the headwater of the river of love. That is true of every bit of love that exists in the world. James 1:17 says, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.” Every good thing we ever experience ultimately comes from God. Is love a good thing? Yes. It is the best thing. It is the thing we need most of all. A lack of love distorts and ultimately destroys us. We cannot live without love. Follow the logic. All good comes from God, love is pure good, therefore all love comes from God.

Wait, I experience love from people, not just God. Let’s think about that. Where does your food come from? I got my food this week at Von’s. I also got some from Rubio’s. Yes, but where did that food ultimately come from? It came from nature. The fish in your taco came from the ocean. The fruit and veggies you got at Von’s came from farms and orchards. The food might have been delivered to you by a grocery store or a restaurant, but it was nature that provided it. Similarly, people may deliver love to you, but ultimately it comes from God. Every bit of love you have ever received is a gift from God.

Fine, God is love, but what does this have to do with the thing we started with? What does this have to do with our problem of needing to feel like we measure up but knowing that we really don’t? I will start to answer that by telling you a story from my life.

My first year in grad school as a poor single man I worked at Albertson’s to support myself. There was another guy from my school who also worked at that store. This guy was a really good guy that I liked a lot. He was also a very good looking man. He was male model handsome. He had a lot going for him. He was smart, he was a really good athlete and he was very charming. It was important to me to do well at that job, so I worked hard and very diligently. I kept my head down and gave it my very best. But I was periodically in situations where I couldn’t keep from overhearing some conversations between some of the women who worked in the store. I heard them talk about that guy, about how hot he was and for the ones who were single how they’d love to get his attention. I tried to tune it out and not listen, but you know, you kind of hear what you hear. You can’t help it. I wondered what it would be like to have that kind of attention. At that point in my life I was lonely. I knew the women in the store didn’t talk like that about me. I knew that on my best day I was Joe Average that no one noticed. I was far enough along in life to know that I didn’t set women’s hearts to fluttering just by walking into the room. I also knew that I was not going to get any more handsome or taller or attractive. I was what I was. I kind of wished I was more like that guy, because what I wanted was to attract some lovely young woman that would love me. I wasn’t interested in any of the women at that store, it was the larger issue of drawing the attention of women that I cared about.

A couple of years later an incredible young woman entered my life. This woman was so special that I would have gleefully traded the attention of every other woman in the world for some notice from her. Then over the period of less than a year God worked a miracle. That young woman not only noticed me, she got to the place where she declared that she loved me and wanted to spend her life with me. And she has loved me now for almost 42 years. During all those years I have never thought about or cared even the tiniest little bit about what other women think of me. I have no interest at all in what they might think of me. It hasn’t and it doesn’t matter to me even a little. I have been set free from that because that one woman loves me, and that’s all that matters to me.

This has been a reminder of a huge lesson that pertains to our big problem. What we need is not to be more beautiful, more attractive, to measure up more, but to be loved. Trying to be more beautiful creates stress, weariness, frustration and failure. Being loved sets us free. God is love is the greatest news the world has ever received. It means he loves us not because we deserve it, not because we are so beautiful and worthy of it, but because it is his nature to always love.

In Ephesians 3:19 Paul prayed that his readers would come “to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fulness of God.” The way we are set free, filled up with God’s life, his joy and his peace and his hope, is to know how much he loves us.

LOVE IS THE RESULT OF BEING LOVED BY GOD

In verse 7 John states the main command of this passage. “Let us love one another.” This is what we should do since God loves us. We ought to love others as he has loved us. In fact, that will be the inevitable result of being loved by God. Verse 8 says a person who doesn’t love people, is not born of God and does not know God.

When a person is born of a set of parents, some of the life of those parents is poured into that child. We get a mixture of DNA from our mother and our father. That happens every time a child is born. When we are born of God, the same thing happens. In a sense we get God’s DNA in our souls. What has John just told us about God’s DNA? It is love. It is the epitome of perfect love. It is the motive behind everything God does. That DNA is put into our souls. What effect do you think that is going to have on us? That love will inevitably begin to show up in us.

I had a colonoscopy earlier this year. I wonder about the person who came up with that idea. Yes, I know it is a very effective medical tool, but really? Some guy woke up one day and said, “Hey, I have an idea. Let’s take a camera and shove it the wrong way up a one way street inside this person’s innards and see what’s in there.” I wonder if this wasn’t originally created as an enhanced interrogation technique. Anyway, whoever did that discovered that it was pretty foggy up that street and visibility was very poor. So the doctors decided to make that test useful they needed to clear out the fog so they could actually see in there. The night before a colonoscopy, that is what they do. They tell you to drink a thousand gallons of some kind of liquid. All right, it’s not a thousand gallons, but it’s not a teaspoon either. I drank that stuff, and, fortunately, it didn’t taste that bad. Then nothing happened. For a little while. But that stuff they give you has an inevitable effect. If you pour it into your digestive system, it will have an effect. It happens every single time. Sure enough, I found myself dashing for the bathroom where I spent considerable time while that stuff cleared the fog off the runway. My point here is, that stuff has its intended effect, and it has it always.

Having God’s DNA will have its effect as well. It always does, without fail. What it does is cause us to love others. Now we can resist that. We can say no and choose to serve ourselves. But if we have the Spirit of Jesus in us, he will drive us always to love others. We will be compelled to love others the way God loves us. That means unconditionally. It means loving regardless of how deserving or undeserving people might be. It means continuing to love even when it seems unreasonable.

You might be thinking, well if being born of God inevitably means a person will love as God loves, why did John have to command us to love others? Wouldn’t it just happen? Unfortunately, though God will compel us to love others, we can still choose to resist him. We can say no. We can choose to live the old way and decide to serve ourselves.

Toby and Anna just moved into a home that is new for them. Somehow I ended up helping them move stuff again. And I got in on the fun of assembling the girls’ beds. Fortunately the beds had instructions and all the tools one needed to put them together included. We had everything we needed to do it. But we could have chosen to say, “Nah, we don’t need that stuff. We’ll do it our way.” We could have ignored all the parts and tools and instructions. The results would not have been pretty, but we could have done it. God has given us all we need to love as he loves, but we can say, “Nah, I don’t need that stuff. I’m going to do it my way.” The results won’t be pretty if we do.

OUR LOVE WILL DEPICT GOD

Verse 12 tells us that no one has seen God. Now, in a sense they have. John himself had written in his gospel in John 1:18, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” In other words, Jesus is God in human form and has shown us what God is like. But no one can see God the Father, who is a Spirit. We don’t see him now.

But John went on to say if we love one another God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. God’s love is not intended just to make us feel better, but to change us. It is completed when it flows through us to other people. But why did John start that verse by saying no one has seen God? What is the connection between that and what comes next? It is simply this, when God’s love is completed by us loving others, people actually begin to see what God is really like. In a sense he is revealed by our love!

Have you noticed that movies and television are very popular? Why do we all like to watch them so much? Yes, I know, we like to be entertained, but why are they entertaining to us? When I was a kid, I remember that we used to pretend. We used our imaginations and pretended to be cowboys or explorers or soldiers or big league baseball players. The actors in movies, television shows and plays, are all just pretending. They are doing what we did as little kids. They are just pretending to be something they aren’t. I know that they might object that what they’re doing is an art, but it really isn’t much different. They just have bigger budgets. It is true that in a sense acting is an art. Laurie and I started watching a couple of shows over the holidays in which the acting was terrible. You can see it right away. You realize these people are just pretending and they’re not very good at it. So you stop watching. Why do we like watching people pretending to be or do something that’s not true? It’s because watching a good story acted out can bring it to life. And when done well it touches our hearts. It makes us feel inspired, or happy or deeply touched. It kind of bypasses our brains. We watched a Hallmark type movie. It was formulaic, cliched, utterly predictable, and so very schmaltzy. But it was executed well. Even as I watched I knew it was schmaltzy and predictable and I was being manipulated, but in the end it made me feel happy because love won out.

What John is telling us is that we have the possibility for touching people at a deep level, almost bypassing their brains and going straight to their hearts. When God’s love flows through us, when we love one another the way God loves us, it has the kind of effect that a great movie does. It touches people’s souls. It enables them to in a sense see God, to discover that he is real. It does that in a way that their intellect cannot argue with because it happens at a level deeper than intellect.

The Scriptures tell us that one of the most profound things that can happen to a person is to have an encounter with God, to, in effect, see him as he is. This is what we were created for, and even though we often don’t know it, our souls thirst for it. By loving as God loves us, John claims, we actually can help people encounter God, to have that most profound, life-changing event.

We are created by God to love. It is part of God’s DNA, and now he has put it in us who are born of him. This is what we are on earth to do. The way we will most experience life, is by loving as he loves and in so doing help people encounter God. This is the most exciting, most meaningful thing we can ever do.

CONCLUSION

In his book, *Life In Christ*, the late Martyn Lloyd Jones wrote, “The more I study the New Testament and live the Christian life, the more convinced I am that our fundamental difficulty…is the lack of seeing the love of God.”

We cannot give people what we do not have. The place we must start is by seeing and believing how vastly, deeply, totally, unconditionally God loves us. We must let his love heal the hurts in our hearts and settle them down so we are at peace with him and with ourselves.

Then we should begin the great quest of loving others. We should get excited about making our lives a work of art, a play or a movie in which we display for others the infinite and powerful love of God. This is what we are here to do. As we seek to enable people to see God through his love played out in our lives, we will find real power, real meaning and real life.