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A HOSE, NOT A JUG

1 John 4:13-21

Love is a big theme in the book of 1 John, and it is one that speaks to all of us. We have recently gone through the Christmas season during which the Hallmark Channel is the most watched network on television. Their movies, in addition to all being pretty much the same, don’t actually have much to do with Christmas. They’re usually just set in small towns where there’s snow. They are all romances. They are popular because the message of love is appealing to all of us. We saw last week the crucial importance of love in our lives. This week we will return to that theme, but look at some other aspects of it. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that.” That is a profound truth that is widely ignored or forgotten in our nation. There has been a huge outpouring of protest against injustice and prejudice in our land recently, and rightfully so. But there has been an awful lot of anger as part of it. It is certainly easy to see why, but the problem is that anger leads to hate. And Dr. King was correct. Hate cannot cure hate, only love can do that.

In his book, *The Notebook*, Nicholas Sparks had one character say, “I am nothing special, of this I am sure. I am a common man with common thoughts, and I’ve led a common life. There are no monuments dedicated to me, and my name will soon be forgotten. But I’ve loved another with all my heart and soul, and to me, that has always been enough.”

Yes, I know, that is a syrupy romance novel. But that statement that loving another is really enough to make a life much more than common, is right in line with what God tells us. So much of life in the end will boil down to how much we have loved. The famous psychologist, Karl Meninger, said, “Love cures people, both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.” Let’s look at what John says about that in 1 John 4:13-21.

JOHN REITERATED SOME BIG IDEAS

In this letter John had a writing style that reminds me that he was an old man when he wrote it. The stereotype of age is that young people generally are the source of new, innovative ideas. Older people usually are not thought of as being especially innovative, but they bring something else to the table. They often have wisdom that allows them to cut through all the confusion of life and see what really matters. The vantage point of many years and being near the end of life enables them to differentiate between the things that proved to be rabbit trails in their lives and the things that actually count for something. I see this in my own life. There were lots of things that I stressed over, when it came to ministry, raising children, finances, and other aspects of life, that I now see didn’t matter all that much. I can see the things that were important, and I realize there weren’t all that many of them.

You see that in this letter, where John has a few crucial truths that he returns to repeatedly. The legend about John, and all we have is legend, is that when he was extremely old and somewhat frail in his final days of life, they would bring him to meet with the church and he would say, “Beloved, love one another.” He would do that every Sunday. Whether that really happened, we can’t know for sure, but the legend grew up because you can see that message show up in his writing.

In this passage he pounds on a few of his crucial themes. He was particularly intent on these themes because he was dealing with false teachers who had two characteristics that were huge problems. The first was that they denied Jesus was the Christ, God revealing himself in human form and rescuing the human race. Second, they were arrogant and unloving toward those who disagreed with them. They did not love the followers of Jesus.

In verses 14-15 John wrote, “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.” This is the litmus test we saw earlier in the book. We know that the heart of the truth is that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the world.

The other theme that John returns to in these passages is that if we know God we will love others as he has loved us. In verse 16 he wrote, “Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.” Then at the end of the section in verse 21 he said, “He has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.” Verse 20 says anyone who claims to love God but hates a brother or sister is a liar.

Laurie and I came up with an idea of a present that we thought we could get for our kids at Christmas. Koa wood is a beautiful Hawaiian wood that is rather scarce, thus usually quite expensive. We thought it would be great if we could buy koa wood clocks, one for Michael and Carissa and another for Toby and Anna. We did some research and found ones that were, unsurprisingly, very expensive. Laurie kept looking around on the Internet and found ones that were very reasonably priced. They didn’t look as nice as the expensive ones, but they seemed like they would still be good. So we ordered two of them. When they arrived we were more than a little dismayed. They weren’t koa wood at all. They were actually photos of a koa wood face pasted on some cheap particle board. They were ugly and terrible. They were so bad that when Laurie investigated how to return them and get a refund, the company said they would refund our money but not to send the clocks back. Just keep them and we’ll give your money back. A person who claims to be a follower of Jesus, but doesn’t love is like those clocks. They are not the real thing, just a cheap imitation. This was a point blank broadside at the false teachers and their followers, who in addition to denying Jesus, also did not love other people.

These are themes we have seen throughout this letter. If we got these two ideas firmly planted in our hearts, we’d get what John was writing about. But he did have more to say than those two things, and in the process of discussing those ideas in this section of the letter he also stated a couple of profoundly important ideas that we will look at next.

JOHN REVEALED TWO HUGE TRUTHS

***We love because God first loved us***

At first glance this is a fairly simple and somewhat obvious statement. God loved us first, and we respond to his love. Jesus came into this world and gave himself for us without asking anything of us first. God offers forgiveness and eternal life to us. He makes that initial move, and we respond to it. In fact, the entire Christian life is a response to what God did for us. We love God because he loved us first.

But there is more wrapped up in what seems to be a simple truth. Consider this: are there any people who are against love? The obvious answer is no, apart from a few psychopaths or sociopaths who don’t give love any thought. The rest of the human race is in favor of love. Humans sing “all you need is love” and “love is what makes the world go around,” “what the world needs now is love, sweet love,” and “come on people now, smile on your brother, everybody get together, try to love one another right now.” No one is against love. We all agree we need love. Those songs I just quoted are all old, dating back to the 1960’s. But they are still quoted and sung. That last one is being used in a TV commercial right now.

There aren’t many things that humans all agree on. It seems like in our country no matter what the question is, half will be on one side and half will be on the other. It’s like we can’t agree on anything. But we agree on this. We need love. We need more love individually. Our nation needs more love. The whole world needs more love. That is universally agreed. That brings up a curious and bothersome question. If everyone agrees we all need to love each other and the thing the world most needs is love, why is there so little love? We see people call for justice and unity, then display great hostility and total lack of love toward those they perceive to be on “the other side.” If you peel back the cover of every single human endeavor or group, under the surface you will see seething tensions, discord, jealousy, suspicion, division and animosity at various levels. It does no good to pretend this is not so. We know it is so, and you find it everywhere. Our little neighborhood of 70 homes is a peaceful place. For the most part we have great neighbors. But under the surface peace there has been considerable turmoil. The past few years we’ve seen neighbor against neighbor and our little homeowner’s association has been a battleground.

When everyone agrees that we need more love, we are all in favor of it, we are all appealing for more of it, how is it that there has been and continues to be, a distressing lack of love among us? There are two factors that cause this strange dilemma. The first is **human nature**. Our nature has a characteristic that is as deeply embedded in us as anything in our being. It is that we are obsessed with ourselves. This is like a force stronger than gravity that exerts a powerful and ceaseless pull on us. It is our default that we go to with no conscious thought or choice. It just happens, and it happens every moment every day of our lives.

Congress passes another stimulus bill, and we immediately wonder, “How will this affect me?” We see an article in the news about the rollout of the corona virus vaccine listing what the priorities are for who receives the vaccination when, and we ask, “So when will I be able to get it?” Those are just minor evidences of our constant addiction to self. When we wake in the morning, we are thinking about what we should wear today, what we need to do today, it’s all about me, and it never stops. Yes, we can rise above that, but it takes conscious effort, whereas thinking about ourselves just happens.

This is where we run into the second factor that plays into the persistent but puzzling lack of love among human beings. It has to do with the **nature of love**. Love is the polar opposite of our obsession with self. Love is about putting another above ourselves. It is about giving to another, not about receiving or taking care of self. **To truly love requires denial of self**!

I ran into this reality on Monday night. Monday night the NCAA had their pretend national championship game. I say it is pretend because they refuse to have an actual, fair championship tournament. The system is rigged. Nevertheless, it is the closest thing to a championship game they have. This year it pitted Ohio State University against the University of Alabama. I wanted to watch it. I faced the problem that Laurie was not interested in this game. It is, I confess, reasonable to ask, “Rick, do you have any personal connection to either one of those schools?” No. “Do you have any friends or family members that have a personal connection to either of those schools?” No. “Do you have some sort of financial stake in the outcome of the game?” No. “Do you even care about which one wins the game?” Not really. “Then can you explain why it matters to you at all?” Well, no, I can’t. It’s football, and I’m addicted to football, so I still want to watch it even though that makes no sense. Laurie is not addicted to football. She had exactly zero interest in that game and she did not want to watch yet another random football game. So I faced a dilemma. Would I love my wife, or would I love myself? That’s the kind of bind love puts us in on a regular basis. In my own defense, may I say “I didn’t watch the whole game.”

Love is hard. It means saying no to self. If you are a parent you understand this. Recently our little grandson went through a hard stretch. For some reason his digestive system quit working for a time. The poor little guy couldn’t seem to eliminate solid waste. This lasted for several days and he was in considerable discomfort, as you can imagine. Carissa had to take care of this precious little guy when he was very unhappy. She tried everything she could to help him. Finally, after days of this, the dam burst. It was spectacular. It was Poopageddon. Repeatedly. This was not that innocent newborn stuff. It was the real deal, military grade poop, and it was everywhere. Repeatedly. Could we just be real here? Dealing with that is nasty. It is disgusting. If you asked Carissa, she would tell you that she was never a big fan of babies when she was younger, in part because she feared they might do something like that on her if she held them. She did not dream of dealing with that situation, and she most certainly does not enjoy it. But she did it willingly and patiently because Wesley is her little boy and she deeply loves him. When you love, you don’t think about yourself, you think about the other person. You sacrifice what you want and care about for the person you love. *If you are thinking about yourself, you are not loving the other person*.

Put those two factors together. We have our human nature with its obsession with self, and we have love with its denial of self. What do you have? You have matter and anti-matter. Actually, what you have is a truth that is hard for us to swallow, but real nonetheless. It is that **it is not natural for us to truly love**. It is natural for us to dress up self interest in a love costume. We “love” others because, and as long as, we get something from them. But we’re very clever and we work hard to make it look like real love. But for the most part, we “love” as long as it is “working,” meaning we get something approximating that thing we desire from them. If we don’t, all bets are off.

That is why there is a paucity of love among humans. It is why we see depressing statistics on divorce and on how few marriages are actually happy. It seems difficult for just two people, people who have chosen each other out of everyone else in the world and who have promised to love each other, to actually give up self and love each other. The more people you enter into that equation the more difficult it gets. We have to choose to resist our natural tendency and work to love other people, and that can be very hard. It can be tiring in the extreme. The fact is that people are often unreasonable, demanding, and unlovable, and that greatly exacerbates the problem. And that is why love seems so lacking when you look under the surface of human relations.

That brings us back to this statement that we love because God loved us first. Notice the little statement at the end of verse 13. “He (God) has given us of his Spirit.” The tendency is to understand that to mean God has given us his Spirit, which is true. He puts the Spirit of Christ into followers of Jesus. But pay attention to the wording. He has given us *of* his Spirit. The little word translated “of” is a Greek word that means “from” or “out of.” He has given us something from his Spirit. John was alluding to something Paul mentioned in Romans 5:5. “God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” One of the things God has poured into us through his Spirit is his unending, unconditional love.

In order for us to truly love others we are going to need both a **motivation** to love when it is not our natural instinct, and the **capacity** or ability to do so. God’s love in our hearts provides us with both. With his love filling our hearts we will want to love as he does. His love is limitless, so it will give us the capacity to love that we otherwise would not have.

This is what happens when we put our faith in Christ. The late Ray Stedman, great pastor and writer, said that faith in Christ, belief in him, is key to loving as God loves. He wrote, “The theology which robs Christ of his deity also robs man of the one belief that can generate love in him. Thus, to weaken faith is to deaden love…If there is not this relationship of faith, belief in the Son of God, there cannot be the life of God and there cannot be the love of God.”

Yes, all people can “love” to some extent. But the love required for people to live in peace and unity is a radical thing that is not natural and extremely rare. It is truly remarkable, life changing. It requires that divine motivation and capacity.

About a year ago our water utility had to do some work on some nearby pipes and as a result our water would be cut off for about 12 hours. Unfortunately, we didn’t get the word about that until just before the cut off occurred. So we dashed around and filled up some jugs and pitchers with water. Suppose that late in that day when we had used up much of our water a neighbor came over and asked if we could give them some water. Suppose all we had left was a one gallon jug. I’d have to say, “I’m sorry, but we’re about out and really don’t have any to spare.” Now imagine a second scenario. In this one it is not the whole area that has the water cut off, but just our neighbor because they are having problems with their pipes. In that situation if our neighbor asks for some water I would say, “Sure, no problem. Why don’t you take our hose over to your house? It will provide you with all the water you need. Just turn it on.” The hose, of course, is hooked up to the water supply to our house, which is constant and basically unlimited. Which of those scenarios is most like us? Without faith establishing a relationship with God through Christ, it’s going to be the first. We are not going to have love to spare, if any. But with Christ we have tapped into an unlimited supply. The key to it is believing in Jesus, letting God pour out his love into us.

How are naturally self focused human beings ever going to love with self-forgetting, self-sacrificing, unconditional love that is not native to them? Laurie and I have been watching *The Mandalorian* on the Disney channel. I will quote one of his sayings. This is the way. This is the way to love with genuine, solid gold, unconditional love. It is to have God’s love being poured into us, to first be loved by God.

***Perfect love drives out fear***

The second profound truth about love that John tells us is in verse 18 where John says, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear.” Wait, doesn’t the Bible tell us we should fear God? How does that go together with there is no fear in love? Start with what John says in verse 17. “This is how love is made complete among us so that we will confidence on the day of judgment.” That is the fear that John was referring to. The general state of the human condition is that we are afraid of judgment. We are afraid of it because we know if the truth comes out, judgment is not going to go well for us. We are afraid a perfect God will condemn us, because we condemn ourselves. We see much in ourselves worthy of judgment.

But John says God’s perfect love drives out that fear. He has made it so that we can be confident on the day of judgment. In his quest to become a doctor Toby had to face a series of daunting tests, one of which was 9 hours long and another that was 17 hours long. They were ridiculously hard. He studied crazy hard for those tests. By the time he got to the last couple of them I was totally confident he would pass them with flying colors. But he wasn’t as confident. His future hinged on those tests and they were so comprehensive, so difficult, he had some trepidation about how he would do on them. Compare that with a final I faced in my senior year in college. I took a class on computer programming. In my summer job the previous two summers I had mostly programmed computers. I pretty much knew everything the class covered. So for me that class was the proverbial easy A. I breezed through the class, acing everything. Before the final the prof told me I had gotten such high grades on everything in the class that if I skipped the final and got a zero on it, I’d still get an A in the class. How confident do you think I felt going into that final? That is how confident John says we can be going into the biggest final of all, the day of judgment. The prof has already told us we’re going to get an A no matter what.

How can that be? I wouldn’t give myself an A. How could God? I objectively know I don’t deserve an A on that huge exam. John gives us a clue at the end of verse 17. “In this world we are like Jesus.” Literally it says, “As he is, so also are we in this world.” How are we like him? We are in a completely open and free relationship with the Father as Jesus is. We are totally loved and accepted like Jesus is. We are seen as blameless and righteous as Jesus is. The reason is not that we are as good as Jesus, we are perfect like he is. It is because God the Father accepts Jesus’ score on the test as our score. Do you think Jesus is concerned about judgment day? No, he’s the judge. That’s how confident we can be, because we’ve got his score.

Ultimately when we are afraid of God it boils down to fear of judgment. We fear he won’t accept us and will condemn us. John says God’s perfect love has removed that fear altogether. There are great reasons why God did that for us. The first is that fear doesn’t do what we think it will do. We think fear is necessary to get people to be good. God has to hold the threat of judgment over us to get us to obey. We think without that threat we won’t do what he says, because that’s how the world works. Suppose the California legislature, which leads the nation in quixotic and often foolish ideas, passes a new law. This law says all our freeways will continue to have speed limits, but there will be no penalty for violating them. What do you think will happen? Oh, well people will heed the speed limits because they know they are for their own good. Yeah, uh, I don’t think so. People will be breaking 100 on the freeway every chance they get. So we think if God removes punishment people will run wild.

The problem with that is that while the threat of punishment keeps people from going all Indy 500 on the freeway for the most part, it has never been able to make people truly good and godly. The Old Covenant demonstrated this clearly. It can get people to create a front, an image of real godliness, but it doesn’t change their hearts and make them truly holy. It can make people religious and hypocritical, but it can’t make them truly like Jesus right down to their very core. It never has and it never will. God wants us to be holy, truly godly and good, not religious and appearing good.

The second reason is that being afraid of God will never create love in our hearts for him and give us intimacy with him. It will cause us to, at best, hold him at arm’s length. One of my favorite movies is an old classic from the 90’s called *The Sandlot*. It is the origin of the classic line, “You’re killin’ me, Smalls.” The story is about a boy who is something of a loner, whose family moves to LA. It seems to make things worse for him, but then he encounters a group of boys who play baseball on an empty lot in the neighborhood every day. He’s not good at baseball, but they can use him as a warm body, and he becomes part of the group. One rule on the sandlot is you must not hit a home run over the left field fence. That’s because in the yard on the other side of that fence lived a massive dog with a terrifying bark that the boys called, “The Beast.” A ball that went into that yard was gone forever. The boys were scared to death of The Beast and would not go anywhere near him. In the end, through a series of surprising adventures, the boys actually ended up coming face to face with the dog and his owner and discovered them both to be a delight. The dog loved them, and they loved him. As long as they were afraid of him they stayed as far from the dog as possible. It was only when they found they didn’t have to fear him that they could get close to him.

God wants us to come close to him, to live in an intimate, loving relationship with him. Hebrews 10:22 tells us that he wants us to draw near to him in full assurance. That can only happen if we are not afraid of him. But what about all those commands to fear God? Look at Psalm 34:9. “Fear the Lord, you his holy people.” That sounds pretty definitive. It is a command to fear the Lord. Yes, but go on to the next verse. It says, “The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.” Do you seek that which you’re afraid of? I don’t like heights. I’m not hyper about it, but I’m not a fan. Here’s a promise. If it is in my control, I will never go sky diving. The thought of it makes me a little sick inside. We do not seek that which we’re afraid of.

Notice the ends of both verses 9 and 10. Verse 9 says, “those who fear him lack nothing.” Verse 10 says, “those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.” Fearing and seeking God produce the same result. This is Hebrew poetry, in which often a thing was stated, and then it would be repeated in a slightly different way. The point is that fearing God and seeking God are much the same thing. Look back at verse 8. “Taste and see that the Lord is good, blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.” You don’t take refuge in someone you’re afraid of.

Fearing God means being in awe of him. It means have enormous respect for him. It means loving him with all your heart. That’s the kind of “fear” God wants us to have for him. I would like Laurie to fear me like that. Not be afraid of me, but have huge respect for me, total confidence in me, knowing I will always seek her good and protect her, and that because of that she would love me and seek to be with me every moment that she can and desire to make me happy. That’s what God desires for us in respect to him as well. That’s what he means when he tells us to fear him. It does not mean be afraid.

John says in verse 18 “fear has to do with punishment.” The word translated “punishment” is from a root that meant “to lop off, cut short, impede, limit or restrain.” When we are afraid of God, it limits us, impedes us, it imprisons us. We don’t experience freedom. But God’s love is perfect and drives out fear. God’s love sets us free. In his love we are free to be in his presence and we are set free from imprisonment that our selfishness has created. We are free to love.

APPLICATION

DON’T BE AFRAID OF GOD, FEAR HIM

God’s love has totally eliminated the need for us to be afraid of God. We don’t need to fear that he might reject us, condemn us, confine us or punish us. He loves us, and his goal is to set us free. He wants us to be free to live unfettered lives of passion and enthusiasm. He wants to rejoice and freely live every moment in his presence. He wants us to never doubt that the question of judgment has been answered forever in our favor. He wants us to be happy to live every day with him.

God wants us to fear him in the sense of being astounded at his power and majesty, yes, but at least as much at his grace and his love for us. He wants us to take refuge in him. He wants us to seek him and love him with all our might, knowing that those who seek him will lack nothing.

DON’T BE A JUG, BE A HOSE

God has poured out his love into us and will continue to do so. But he doesn’t want us to be a jug that just stores up a set amount of love. He wants us to be hoses, with his love flowing through us to other people.

Here’s the cool thing, there is no fear in love. Fear will always keep us from other people. We fear what they might think or what they might do if we make ourselves vulnerable to them. But remember what we learned about the nature of love. When we love, we are not thinking about ourselves. There will be no fear of what they might do, say or think, because we aren’t concerned with ourselves. We will just be thinking about the other person and how we can care for them.

Laurie received a letter from someone out of her past. This was a woman that Laurie had made effort to befriend because she was in a new place where she knew no one. The two of them became good friends. But several years later this friend kind of threw Laurie under the bus, and not long after that she moved away. She wrote this letter, now years later, to tell Laurie that she missed their friendship. She felt bad about what had happened. She said she had felt that for a long time and had wanted to reach out to Laurie to seek to reconnect. But she had not done so. She described what stopped her as pride, and there was an element of that. But I believe there was a large dose of fear involved. What if Laurie was angry at her? What if Laurie wasn’t open to her effort to restore relationship. What if she rejected her? Finally, she chose to love. Love is what defeated the fear. When you are focused on actually caring for the person, you forget about yourself.

God does not want us to live in fear. That’s why he loved us first and removed fear from the equation. He now wants us to live in love, not in fear. The more we love, the more we will be freed from fear. Actress Reese Witherspoon said, “You always gain by giving love.” It’s true. We were created in God’s image. We were created to be like him. But God always loves, freely, sacrificially, unconditionally. When we love like that we will begin to experience life as he intended. This is what we were put on earth to do, and it is the most fulfilling thing we can do.