



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

1 John 4:7-12

"Miscellaneous Topics #33: The Divinity of Love"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] This morning we are turning to 1 John chapter 4, verse 7 through verse 12 for the Scripture reading, and the message is to be based on this passage as a slight diversion from our ordinary treatment of consecutive ministry. I think I commented last year, if it wasn't last year it was the year, that I discovered not too many years ago that John Calvin never diverted from the exposition of the particular book that he was teaching on special holidays. There he did not give messages on the resurrection at Easter time, or on the incarnation at Christmas time, and did not recognize other holidays that they recognized, but continued in the exposition of the particular books in which he was engaged.

There is, I think, some reason occasionally for diverging and today we're taking the liberty of doing that. And if you have your New Testaments read with me verse 7 through verse 12 of 1 John chapter 4. I'll read you follow along in your Bibles. John writes,

"Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth has been born of God, and knoweth God. (Now the Authorized Version that I am reading has "is born" the sense of this is "has been born." And that is the sense of the Greek verb

gegenmetai which is a perfect passive found in the original text. So every one that loveth has been born of God and knoweth God.) He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us (I am emphasizing that because in the original text the emphasis rests upon those pronouns, not that we loved God but the he loved us), and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No man hath seen God at any time. (That seems a strange sentence to insert in the theme of this particular paragraph. We'll try to give you a suggestion as to why John did insert it here. We think of chapter 1 and verse 18 of his gospel in which he said, "No man hath seen God at any time. The only begotten Son who is the bosom of the Father, he has declared him. But here it seems out of place. No man hath seen God at any time.) If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. "

May the Lord bless this reading of his word. Let's bow together in a moment of prayer.

[Prayer] Our heavenly Father we give Thee thanks for the ministry of the word of God to us. And we pray Lord that as we look into a portion of it today that the Holy Spirit may take of the things of Christ and show them to us. Give us open hearts and minds to receive Thy word. And may, when we leave, we know Thee in a more significant way. And we ask, Lord, that through the days of this week our lives may reflect a deeper knowledge of Thee through Christ.

We thank Thee for this wonderful season when we concentrate our attention again on that first step in the manifestation of the love of God to us, the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are thankful that he took upon himself an additional nature, a

human nature, became the God-man, and has become wedded to human nature forever. What condescension and how thankful, Lord, we should be when we reflect upon what has been done for us in loving grace. And when we think of how unworthy we are, what rebels we are taken with weapons in our hands, we can only praise and thank and adore our great triune God. We worship Thy name. And Lord, we pray that through the Holy Spirit, the ministry of the word of God may build us up in our faith.

We ask, Lord, thy blessing upon each one present here. And we pray that as a result of the ministry of the word we may all be strengthened and edified. And for those who may be here in the sovereign providence of God, but who do not know our Lord Jesus Christ, may today be the day when the Holy Spirit turns their thoughts to their sin and to his marvelous grace in the provision for sinners. And may they flee to the cross and receive in a gracious way, apart from works, the salvation of God through Christ.

Father, we pray for those whose names are listed in our calends of concern. We pray Lord Thy blessing upon them physically, spiritually, whatever the needs may be, Thou knowest them. We pray that they may be met through our great God in heaven. We pray especially Lord for some who are very, very dear to us who are in the hospital not far away from this building, and we pray particularly for them. For others Lord who have needs of different kinds we commit them to Thee also. We give Thee thanks for all that Thou art to us in the affairs of daily life as well. Now Lord, we entrust the service to Thee and the ministry of the word. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message] The subject for this morning in the ministry of the word is "The Divinity of Love." Emerson's famous line "All mankind loves a lover," still striking a responsive chord in the hearts of many has a rival. "All mankind loves love." And that epitomizes the flabby, floppy, fluffy, wimpy, 20th century. It's said to be the answer to all of our questions, love. Some time ago in 1983 a contemporary film director said with reference to a film he directed in which a little girl rehabilitates two hardened criminals with her

love, "I'm trying to show that when the miracle of love happens, anything is possible with human beings."

I imagine that most people in the 20th century in the United States of America in our western world would really feel very sympathetic to a statement like that. When the miracle of love happens, almost anything can take place with human beings. What is striking is that in Christian theology we have had the emphasis upon the love of God to such an extent that it has become the attribute of God that has swallowed up, it often seems, all of the other attributes. And so we are to think of God as simply a God of love. Now, it's a well known fact that all heresy begins with a partial truth. And we would not want to deny that love is a very important attribute of God. But then, God's being is characterized by the possession of a number of attributes and a number of properties. And not only is God a God of love, but he is a God of grace. He's a God of righteousness; he's a God of justice. And he is a God of holiness, to speak of just some of these attributes. But what has happened in the 20th century is the emphasis has been so put upon love and love in our society and love in our Christian society to the extent that there is a weakening of the sense of sin. And when the weakening of the sense of sin takes place, then there follows consequently a decline of interest in the doctrines of the atonement, and the doctrines of justification by faith. And even in evangelical and orthodox circles this has taken place. So love has become the preeminent doctrine, and when we think of God in the 20th century, we're inclined to think of a loving God and forget all the other aspects of his being.

The passage before us outlines some important features about the love of God. And more than anything else it gives us God's view of the love of God. And for that reason it's very important, because what is important is not what we think about the love of God, or even we Christians think about the love of God, but what does God think about his love? How does he describe it? How does he define it? And when you read a passage like this, set in the context of John's great thoughts concerning love, for this is for

the Apostle John the same kind of exposition of the nature of love that is found in Paul's exposition in 1 Corinthians 13. The difference between the two is simply this, that in the case of the Apostle Paul he writes what may be considered a perfect prose poem on love. But John is different because his character is different, and so he just takes love out and like a diamond holds it before us and then turns it in the sunlight so that we can see all of the beautiful facets of it. So John speaks of love in that sense. And when he comes right down to the definition of what love is, divine love, the love of God, he says divine love is centered in the divine Sonship and the Messianic mission of the Lord Jesus Christ. And in fact, when we say God is love we're saying the same thing as when we say God sent his Son to provide an atonement for sin. That is the love of God concretely expressed.

Now, unfortunately we tend to think of the love of God as some abstract sentimental feeling. And so we have men exhorting Christians to love one another in the sense of to have some nice feelings with reference to individuals. We live in a day in which the intellect is deemphasized and the will and the emotions are emphasized. And so the love of God is an emotional experiential thing apart from its intellectual side. But the Apostle John gives us a good example of the other side, and he lays great stress upon the fact that when we read "God is love," we're saying nothing more than God sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. That's what is meant by God is love.

Now, this passage we will expound that thought, and if you want to leave at the present moment you will have the main point that I will make. But I hope that there will be a few other things worthwhile. F.F. Bruce, one of the better commentators in evangelical ranks, entitles this little section that I have read for the Scripture reading, "In praise of Love," another well known evangelical commentator writing on the Greek text has said that this passage expresses God's love and our love. Well, first of all John begins with the exhortation to love. He says in verse 7, "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God." Now John is writing about how we can tell truth from error. And you know there are lots of people

who think about Christians and love who do not think straight about Christians and love. And so John in the context is telling us how we can distinguish the Spirit of truth from error. And when we talk about love there are certain things about love that distinguish true love from false love.

Now, no doubt you have been told that in the New Testament the emphasis on love is upon its self-giving character. The love of the New Testament we are told, is self-giving love, not acquisitive love. And we're often told that there are three words that the Greek uses to express love. One of these words is the word from which we get the adjective erotic, *eros*. It means to love in the sense of sensual affection, often sexual affection. It's not found in the New Testament, not that that kind of love is not proper in its place. That love, it has been said, is a kind of love that may be expressed by the word take. Then there is the word *phileo*, we think of it in nouns like Philadelphia, brotherly love. *Phileo*, it means the kind of love that individuals have because they like the same things. My friend from Oklahoma wrote about gold. He evidently plays golf, he likes golf. I like golf. It could be said that we like one another because our interests are similar. That kind of love is *Phileo* kind of love, the love of give and take someone has said. The New Testament lays stress upon, we are told, *agapeo*. *Agapeo*, the Greek verb for love used often in the New Testament, is a word that speaks of love as the directive love of the will directed toward an object, and usually directed toward the object in a self-sacrificial way. Now, these are just general things. Incidentally, that is the love of giving. So we have the love of taking, the love of give and take, the love of giving.

But strictly speaking those things are not absolutely true. In fact, in the Old Testament, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in 2 Samuel chapter 13 describing Amnon's passion for his sister Tamar, and the result of raping of her, the Old Testament Greek translators used the word *agapeo*, and so it's the context that determines the sense of the verb for love.

Now, we have here an expression of love that is obviously of a self-sacrificial character. "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth has been born of God, and knoweth God." I'd like for you to pay particular attention about what John says about love. You might think love is something we all can practice. Cannot everyone practice love, well according to the world's definition with the term love, yes. A husband who loves his wife, though he may be a rebel so far as faith in God is concerned, is a loving person. A wife who loves her husband but who at the same time has rejected the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ according to our terminology may be called a loving person. But you see, when we say things like that we have watered down the biblical conception of love. The human conception of love is a lower conception. It has to do with the kind of affection that may exist between two people, but at the same time has no relationship to love of God at all.

Now, God of course is the greatest object, the most significant object for the exercise of love. In the Bible, one cannot love when his love is directed to something other than God. Notice what John says. He says, "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God." Now, you might say, well the love that we have when we reject Jesus Christ has come from God. But he doesn't look at it that way. It's obvious he is not speaking of God as creator. It's true everything comes from God. But he's not talking about that. That's evident from what follows. He says "Love is of God; and every one that loveth has been born of God." In other words, the kind of love that comes from God is not the love that might be given by a creator, but it's the love that comes by divine regeneration. The love of God is love that is the product of divine generation, we say regeneration. So "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth has been born of God." In other words, there can be no true biblical love without love of God. So the individual who says he loves, or even the individual concerning whom we speak can say she or he is a very loving person, but they reject the gospel, that's impossible. Only if we redefine our terms can we say something like that. It's like

saying an individual does good works, but he's not a believer in Christ. The Bible makes it very plain that there are no good works that do not arise out of faith, and which are not directed toward the glory of God.

But what about all the benefit works that individuals do to benefit the community and to benefit individuals? Well they are human good works, and after all we can say, they are good in the human sense, but when it comes to divine things they are not good. "For by grace are we saved through faith, that not of ourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast." I think if you'll analyze it, and I don't want to condemn the men and women who have been the ones who have ministered to our society and our community, but many of those gifts have been given in order to ultimately benefit themselves. That is, they are given with certain goals and aims in view. But anyway, that's not the point. The question that arises, can non-Christians love? No, non-Christians cannot love in the biblical sense of love. It's true that as a result of the fall the image of God in which man was created is not totally destroyed, it's corrupted. And so there are certain things that continue. We call them common grace. But it's not biblical love if it refuses at the same time the highest object of love, the Father and the Son. So John says, "Every one that loveth has been born of God." And only those born of God truly love.

That's the positive enforcement of the exhortation to love. Now the negative enforcement follows. He says, "He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love." To love is to know, and to know is to love. To love is the necessity of the nature of God. He cannot but love. And the individual born of God who possess nature from God cannot help but love. This is not a reversible statement. When we read God is love we don't mean love is God anymore than when we read in chapter 1, "God is light" that light is God. Or when we read "Our God is a consuming fire," that a consuming fire is God. This is descriptive of God. And we certainly don't mean when we see "God is love," that

this is the superior attribute of God. It's one of the attributes of God, and it's a very important attribute of God, but it's not the only attribute of God.

Now, when he says, "For God is love," I suggest to you that this is a compressed statement of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, this God is love is an expression of all that is involved from the incarnation of the Lord Jesus, which we celebrate at Christmas time, through the atoning work of the cross, and on to the completion of the work in the Second Advent and kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In other words, when we say God is love, and if someone should say to us, "What do you mean when you say God is love?" We should say what the apostle says. He says, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." That's the meaning of God is love. Or to use the statement he makes in verse 9, "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him." So when you say to me, "What is meant by God is love?" We shouldn't think of sentimentality, being sweet and nice, and being helpful to one another, though things like that may be useful in their place. But we mean when we say God is love, he sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Isn't that a let down? Isn't that a let down? The love of God turns out to be a theological doctrine. But that's what the apostle says. He says, "In this was manifested the love of God to us, because God sent his only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through him."

You might say, well that's the manifestation of the love. Ah, but the next text says, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." That's the love of God. That's what we mean when we say God is love. We are expressing the gospel. He sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. So when we say God is love we're not to think of somebody who's a grandfatherly kind of individual, real sweet, loving, overlooks all of the rambunctiousness of his grandchildren and thinks they're all great when they're guilty of all the greatest kinds of

crimes against one another in the world of the children. But we are to think of holy love, expressed in the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ. When we talk about God is love we cannot ignore the cross. That's involved in what it is to say, "God is love."

Now, I'd like to lay just a little bit of stress on two or three of the things that are said in verse 9 and verse 10. In verse 9 he says, "In this was manifested the love of God toward us." So this is the manifestation of authentic love, and the manifestation is in the fact that he loved us and he sent his Son, or he loved us and sent his only begotten Son into the world that we might live through him, his well loved unique Son. And further that he sent him; it is the divine initiative in the love of God that the apostle stresses. God's love, in which God himself takes the initiative and the first step is the incarnation. He sent his Son. At Christmas time, if we think about the love of God, we're thinking about the incarnation which is the first step in the manifestation of what he has done for us.

Now, this love is an eternal love. All of the things that pertain to God in his attributes are eternal. When we say that God is an eternal being and we say at the same that that he is gracious and he is just, and he is loving. All of the attributes are associated, and so when we talk about God's love we're talking about eternal love, because he's eternal. He's infinite, so we're talking about infinite love. When we talk about grace, we're talking about eternal grace, and infinite grace. And when we talk about justice and righteousness; we're talking about eternal righteousness, eternal justice, and infinite justice. So in this case he sent his only begotten Son, and in this is the manifestation of the eternal love of God. Can you think of an individual who goes out into the forest and cuts down a large tree? And the tree having been felled, he takes a look at it and looking at it from the standpoint of the person who has cut it down, he looks and he sees the rings in the wood that mark the age of the tree. He couldn't have seen them as long as the tree was standing, for the bark hides the rings. But now he can see.

The cross is like that. The cross is the manifestation of the eternal love of God in Christ. And in time we see what was true of God from eternity. Authentic love is expressed in verse 10, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." The passion of a parent for a child, the passion of patriots for their country, and the passion of martyrs for a cause. Sometimes these things are to be admired among men, but they are not expressions of divine love. Divine love is far more than that. Divine love is the conclusion that the Holy Spirit preaches from the work of Christ. In other words, seeing what Christ has done we can say this is the love of God. He loved us, he sent his Son, sent him to die because he was the preexistent divine Son. He sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. That is, he pardons our sins at his own cost. And pardoning our sins at his own cost the Lord Jesus is a penal sacrifice. He bears what we should have borne. It's a sacrifice, and he is violently put to death. And it is one that is a substitutionary sacrifice. As John says, he is the propitiation for our sins. There is no contradiction between the love of God and propitiation for our sins. There's no contradiction between the love of God and the fact that there must be a payment made to cover sins.

Many of our modern theologians, and some of them who camp out in evangelical circles believe it or not, affirm that we cannot really talk about the love of God if at the same time we say that he must be propitiated. Why the magnitude and the greatness of the love of God that he loves apart from any such propitiation. Now, isn't that strange? As a matter of fact, it's the propitiation that tells us the depth of the love of God. That even though he must as a righteous and holy God exact the penalty for sin upon a substitute, he still loves and gives a substitute, which satisfies his holiness and righteousness. Ah, that is true love. It's not love for a God to pass by the claims of his holy nature and to overlook the fact that he is a holy God. It is to participate in human sin. It's to participate in human frailty. And the Scriptures make very plain that God is a loving God, but that his love is holy love. Never let us forget that. Holy love, and so his

holiness must be satisfied, and his love is free by virtue of what Christ has done to go out toward the people of God. There is no contrast between propitiation and love. God loves through the provision of the propitiatory sacrifice.

Some few years ago in studying another question I ran across a statement that James Stalker, the Scottish theologian, made concerning love that I think is very important. Professor Stalker was a great Scottish theologian and has written some very helpful books. He lived around the turn of the century. And around 1909 in one of his books he speaks about the time when he was studying under Professor Dorner, a well known German theologian, and he said, "I have heard the late Professor Dorner say with a blush, half indignation and half shame on his sensitive face, and amidst the deathlike silence in his classroom that a love which gives itself utterly and absolutely away without respect to anything, even to character is the love not of God, but of a harlot." So the kind of God who is just a loving God, who loves without respect to anything, even his own character, but forgets his holiness and righteousness, and forgets that he must punish sin. That's not the love of God. That is the love that's like the love of a prostitute. Even a prostitute asks a price, but the God of modern theology doesn't even ask a price, has no price. His love is worthless. The love of God is a love in which there is the torment of the necessity of executing judgment, but at the same time the love that desires to save the people of God. And it is resolved in the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ who bares the judgment of a holy God and has meted out upon him all the sin and iniquity required and frees God to extend salvation to the people of God and to offer it freely to all. That's the love of God. That is the kind of love that overcomes sin, iniquity, and death itself. I can admire a love like that, but a love that has no price whatsoever that's a worthless kind of a love. It is the love of a harlot, a prostitute.

Now John concludes by saying, "Beloved if God so loved us, we ought also to love on another." Well, that seems to plain and clear that it hardly needs exposition. If you've been born of God and you have the nature of God, and God is love, self-

sacrificial, not self-acquisitive, then obviously if you're going to be a son or daughter of God and you have his nature, you must live like your father. That must be the manifestation of your relationship to your father. It seem so plain.

Why does John say "No man has seen God at any time?" Almost as if he was an old man like I am and suddenly the thought flashed through his mind, something he said some time before. And in chapter 1, verse 18 of his gospel he said, "No man has seen God at any time, the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him." So he slips in that thought and then goes on from there. "No man has seen God at any time." It seems so out of place. Then he continues, "If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us." I'd like to suggest to you why I think John said this. Of course, he has said that the love of God is grounded in the nature of the love; it has its origin in God. And the must of the must of inward constraint, because we have the nature of God, not external compulsion. But you know there is a danger that we all face. We can be so interested in thinking about the love of God and thinking about the necessity of loving one another that we never do it.

In fact, it's possible for us to read things on the love of God in Christ and be deeply moved. And so I was reading John Owen the other day, and I was reading him on communion and my heart was tremendously moved and tears came to my eyes as he spoke about the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's marvelous. But if you never express your love, what's the value of that? You see there is a great deal of danger in rejoicing in the love of God, rejoicing in the things of God, and never expressing them in concrete action. The Father in heaven must have been greatly moved by the thought that the Son of God is willing to become the Messiah, the atoning instrument or agent, is willing to give himself as the atoning sacrifice, but what is the value of that if he had not done it?

Or to put it another way, if the Lord Jesus Christ had come and was incarnate, became the God-man, did the things that he did, but did not die on the cross what value

is that to us? "No man hath seen God at any time," he says. Ah, but we have seen God. We've seen him in just what he's talking about. He loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. And my dear Christian friends, when we say that we are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ and we acknowledge that he has loved us and we acknowledge that we are to love one another, but no one ever sees any manifestation of it whatsoever, we have not truly loved one another. That's what John is talking about. He's saying the love of God is to be seen. It's to be seen in our particular society. And when we see it, ah then we see love in action. If we love one another, then God dwelleth in us and his love is perfected in us. And the love of God is not perfected in us, brought to its completion until we've rejoiced in it and rise and become misty eyes over it and perhaps we've shed a few tears over it. And then we have responded in specific ministry of divine love to others. I'm not talking about patting somebody on the back coming in church Sunday morning. I'm not talking about exercising the office of greeter in the church. I'm not talking about having meetings in which we gather around the table and we share experiences and discuss the plight of the Cowboys and things like this. That's not Christian love. Christian love is the recognition that some of our brethren need ministry need your ministry; need your help, your specific help, your unadvertised help.

In other words, the incarnation of your love. That's what John is talking about. To love one another is to love in the sense that God has loved. He sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. That's the love of God. So we love because it's the nature of God of whom we're born, because he's loved us, because we then experience his abiding presence when we love. That's the test of the love of God.

And the Christmas season, what a beautiful time to love. And so let us love, let us love with a holy love, no shallow sentimentality; an atoning love, let us not forget the cross when we think about the manger; and a saving love, true spirituality is found in faith and love. John makes that very plain. He's not talking about love at the expense of faith. He says in verse 23 of the preceding chapter, "And this is his commandment, That

we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment." Let me conclude with the statement of a Puritan. Thomas Watson, one of the finest of them said, "Faith deals with invisibles, but God hates that love which is invisible." May in Believers Chapel there be an expression of the invisible love that some of us have. May it become visible. Let's stand for the benediction.

If you're here today and you've never believed on our Lord Jesus Christ we remind you that the greatest expression of love has taken place, and you may have life and love through faith in him. Let's close now.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for the manifestation of the love of God in the gift of the Son. How blessed we are, oh God, deliver us from an invisible love. May the illustration and example of our marvelous Savior...

[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]