

1John 4.7-12

“Love or Indifference?”

Sermon #4 in a Series on Biblical Change and the Fruit of the Spirit

Preached by Pastor Glenn Durham at Dominion Covenant Church, Omaha, Nebraska, on May 22, 2005.

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Main Idea: *Christians can love God and neighbor with a self-denying, Biblical love because they have been so loved by God.*

Introduction

Someone warned: “Do not love anyone; do not let your happiness depend on something you may lose. Do not put your goods in a leaky vessel. Be careful in love—it may lead you to suffering.” Some here know the hurt; you have broken hearts; you know that to love is to be vulnerable. Should we never love?

C. S. Lewis, commenting on that warning, said: “This [solution] is Stoic ‘apathy.’ We follow One [Jesus] who wept over Jerusalem and at the grave of Lazarus. And even Christ himself comes at last to say to God, ‘Why have You forsaken me?’ There is no escape. There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations [disturbances, anxieties] of love is Hell.”

Today we take our first bite into the fruit of the Spirit, tasting “love.” Be forewarned, however—eating will make you like Jesus—and we killed him. But Lewis is correct—either be, like Jesus, a lover risking a broken heart, or become cold, bitter, unloving.

So that we might experience the wonders of God’s love, we will consider 1) the definition of Biblical love; 2) the opposite, 3) the counterfeit, and 4) the cultivation.

Before we begin, I would make four brief observations. **First**, know that I have picked the topic of mortification and the fruit of the Spirit because it is teaching I desperately need. Please do not imagine that I have arrived; I am learning and seeking to change with you. **Second**, can we admit that this is hard? Someone told me this week that when I ask, “Can I love on you?” I have not allowed you to say, “NO!” Dying to self is difficult. **Third**, let me remind myself as well as you that I have many failures. Helen would not do this to me, but she could easily point to my lack of love. **Fourth**, please know that I cannot cover “love” in one sermon. My hope is that the sword of the Word would cut deep into the center of our beings and plant the seed of God’s love that it might grow, blossom and yield fruit abundant. That such might be true of us, please notice that, as followers of Jesus...

1. We Must Embrace a Biblical Definition of Love (Gospel Love)

Suppose today is Helen’s and my wedding anniversary. There are several options for how I could respond.

Option #1 (love is a feeling, specifically the feeling I have when around the beloved):

I might announce from the pulpit my love for her. Then, at home, I could tell her that I love her and also tell the kids that I love their mom. I could smile a great deal and feel very happy around her. But what if I did nothing else? I gave Helen neither present nor card, did not take her to dinner nor offered to help with the kids. In fact, what if I do nothing for Helen other than profess my affection?

If you were my friend or counselor, you ought to remind me of **1John 3.18**: “My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.” You should confront me with my shallow emotions masquerading as love. You might describe my problem like this: **Glenn, you may be delighting in Helen, but you are doing nothing to delight her.** You seem happy enough with what she does for you, but you seem little interested in making her happy. You are communicating to your wife: “Helen, there is nothing I would rather do than have you delight me.” This is the *popular* definition of love, not gospel love.

Option #2 (love is an action without regard to feeling): I mention nothing from the pulpit nor to Helen all day. In fact, suppose I am in a sour mood on our anniversary. No smiling or kind words, maybe even gruff. But I arrange for babysitting, take her out to dinner, and give her flowers and an expensive diamond. Yet, the whole night I never smile, never say I love you, never express any happiness with her. What would Helen say about that anniversary date? Nothing, nothing for a long time. Why? Because I have still not loved her with gospel love. Please turn to 1Corinthians.

1Corinthians 13.1-3: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ² And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.”

Do not miss Paul’s shocking indictment of our expectation: love cannot be equated with sacrificial action. While it is true that love is not mere warm feelings, and while it is true that love sacrifices even in the absence of feelings of affection, it is not accurate to say that love is simply what you do unrelated to what you feel.¹

So in the anniversary illustration, though I did outward acts, I did not love. Yes, I have “done things” to make her happy, but I have neither enjoyed her nor enjoyed being with her. If, in the first option, I was saying to Helen, in effect: “Helen, there is nothing I would rather do than have you delight me”; in this option I am saying, “Helen, there is much I would rather do than delight you, but I will do my duty.” Duty without delighting is not “gospel love.”

What is gospel love?

Option #3 (Gospel love is more than feelings (it is an action too), but it includes feelings): “Gospel love” toward my wife is love which not only delights to be with Helen, but also delights to delight Helen. The only way to love your wife on your anniversary is both to enjoy her presence and to enjoy making her happy.

John Piper illustrates gospel love this way: “Suppose I tell one of my sons: ‘Be nice to your brother and help him clean up the room, and try and make him happy, not miserable.’ If he helps clean up the room but pouts and exudes unhappiness the whole time, there is no virtue in his effort. Why? Because he has not chosen to make his brother’s happiness his own happiness. His is not a labor of love.”

¹ Compare, Piper, *Desiring God*, 116-117.

If in the first option I was saying to my wife, “Helen, there is nothing I would rather do than have you delight me”; and in the second option saying, “Helen, there is much I would rather do than delight you, but I will do my duty”; then in this third option I say, “Helen, there is nothing I would rather do than delight you. My happiness is bound to your happiness.

1Corinthians 13.4-8a: “⁴ Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; ⁵ does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; ⁶ does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; ⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never fails.”

How is such love possible? It is not if we define love as the warm feeling I get from being with you. On the contrary, Gospel love never fails because it delights again and again in creating joy in and for others. As long as others need to be encouraged, need to be lifted up, need to be strengthened, need to be helped, need to be forgiven, need to be protected, and need to be trusted, gospel love delights in meeting that need and so creating joy in your neighbor. As followers of Christ, we must embrace the Biblical definition of love: “Gospel Love” is both delighting in another and delighting in delighting them.

That the Spirit might produce this love in us,...

2. We Must Deny Ourselves the Opposite of Love: Indifference

Many assume the opposite of love is hate or anger. And if we define love a certain way, then maybe it is. But I am not convinced, for the Bible teaches that God is love yet hates those who continue to sin. Likewise Jesus, love incarnate, was angry at the hardness of the Pharisees’ hearts.

What then is the opposite of love? Is it not indifference? What could be further from the character of Jesus Christ than apathy, than not caring, than a lack of concern?

Look at the cross! I looked up passion in the thesaurus. The antonym listed was “indifference.” The definition of love is the passion of Christ—it is no coincidence that the opposite of passionate love is a lack of concern. What could be further from the character of Jesus Christ than indifference?

Look at the cross! No ordinary man hung upon this instrument of torture. This was God—yes, God in human flesh, but no less God for taking on humanity. Had he a drop of apathy, one word would have lifted Him from the misery of this fallen world and returned Him to the presence of millions of angels singing His eternal praise.

But He stayed on the cross. Why? Not because of the nails! **Michael Card, Why:** “Why did it have to be / a heavy cross he was made to bear? / And why did they nail his feet and hands? / His love would have held Him there.”

O men, how often have we been indifferent to the cares and concerns of our wives, when God has told us to love them as Christ loved his church. O parents, how often we have lacked concern for the concerns of our sons and daughters, when their tender hearts and consciences could have driven us to passionate service. O Christian citizens—how far from gospel love have we fallen when our country needs a compassionate and costly love from her godly men and women! Have we not often been indifferent to the hurts and needs of the very friends we long to see saved?

Gospel love is costly. It brings with it a cross, requiring crucifixion of the old nature, with its selfish passions and desires. It denies the lust of indifference and insists on a staying and costly compassion.

Third, as we seek the Spirit’s love in our lives...

3. We Must Be Cautious of the Counterfeit of Love: “Need Love”

C. S. Lewis calls the counterfeit, “need love” in contradistinction to “gospel love.” If “Gospel Love” is *both delighting in another and delighting in delighting them*, we could define “need love” as delighting in delighting myself.

Realize that both Gospel love and need love bring delight. Both feel good, both excite. The difference is that *need love dies when the need is met; gospel love never fails because your neighbor’s need for love never ends.*

Suppose I have been cutting grass on a hot August day. Helen brings out a big glass of iced tea and asks: “Would you like some ice tea?” “Yes, I would *love* some.” I chug it down and she offers me another. But then I say, “No thanks.” What a change! A few seconds earlier I *loved* the ice tea—but now I am uninterested. Why? My “love” was *need love*. I felt passion for the tea only as I felt the need for the tea.

That is a silly example—let me love you closer to home. Has not this counterfeit been for many of us our working definition of love during dating or marriage?

It works like this: a boy and girl meet and “fall in love.” Now the culture in which we live and breathe and swim—it defines love as my feeling good when I am around you. [One cartoon character said that he knew he was in love because the girl, “carbonated his hormones.”] “I love you” means, “I love having my needs met—my need to be attractive, my desire to be desirable, and my longing to be prized. I love how you delight me. I love who I am when I am around you.”

But then we get married, and the carbonation leaks from the relationship. It gets flat and since our need is not being loved, some people leave their spouse. Others resort to mere duty without joy or delight.

The problem is neither marriage nor spouse; but our definition of love. Many are disappointed because they persist in longing to have their need love met, rather than delighted in loving with gospel love. Many imagine that marriage should be the ongoing experience of “carbonated love” rather than a commitment to Gospel love!

O how hard this is! Not because our spouse is unlovely; it is hard because I am unloving! Know this: before we can bear any significant fruit of Gospel love, we must be cleansed from the desire for the counterfeit by the greater and more satisfying joy of Gospel love.

That brings us to the final point...

4. We Must Actively Cultivate Biblical Love

Five keys to bearing the fruit of gospel love are given in 1John 4.7-11.

4.1. The Source of Love (1John 4.7a)

“Love is of God.” It is not of us! Carbonated love is natural; gospel love is supernatural! Please allow me to be crystal clear: we have it not within us to love with Gospel love! To love in a way that is not degraded by selfishness, not defaced by a self-serving heart, not defiled by self-centeredness—such love is not within me. It comes only by the grace of God!

No wonder people reject the gospel! Sure, people will pray a prayer if we tell them that Jesus loves them and will make them happy if they accept him. But insist that none will be happy unless they love others with a self-denying love that only Jesus can give because we are too evil to love without ruining everything with self-serving thoughts and motives, and they might not be so impressed—unless the Spirit of God is working. Love is of God, not of me.

4.2. *The Necessity of Love (1John 4.7b-8)*

Since loving is so hard, since love requires death to selfish motives and desires, many decide it is not worth the price. Why love, when the cost is so great? Those who know God, love, because God is love.

Last year at election time my kids asked me, “Dad, for whom are we voting?” They love me and that love motivates them to want to be like me.

Those who know God, love with Gospel, costly, self-sacrificing love, because they want to be like God.

4.3. *The Power for Love (1John 4.9)*

Since love is not natural to us, from where will get the love which God commands? Here is exactly where we may fail to appropriate the Gospel, expecting to generate love from within! But what is within is not love!

Look carefully at the last phrase in verse 9: “that we might **live** through Him.” That word, “live” includes all the good works that we might seek to do, including loving others. In fact, you can place the word “love” in the sentence and it will be perfectly true: “God sent His only begotten Son into the World that we might *love* through Him.”

Do you see it? I cannot love those who mistreat me even though God commands me: “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.” What shall I do? I shall see my need for Christ, and through faith in His perfect love, He shall love them through me. I will live and I will love, through Him who has lived and died for me!

The power for love is the life and love of Jesus Christ.

John Piper explains this well: “But there are things we call love which people do who are not born of God [not true believers]. There are loves that [spring from] sexual desire and natural affections and philanthropic aspirations. But these don't point to the supernatural work of God. They are no sign of being born of God. What matters is a love that can only be explained by the supernatural work of God. That's the love that assures us that we are born of God, and that's the love that will cause some in the world (not all, 3.13) to see and give glory to our Father in heaven (Matthew 5.16)... There is nothing more thrilling than experiencing the love of God so deeply that it spills over into our relationships. And that's what this letter is all about: being so deeply transformed by the love of God within that we live the supernatural love of God without.”

The power for love is the life and the love of Jesus!

4.4. *The Definition of Love (1John 4.10)*

We have called it, “Gospel love,” in this sermon; it is based upon this verse. This is how we know what love is: God loved us and sent His son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Therefore Biblical or Gospel Love is “both delighting in another and delighting in delighting them” precisely because Jesus went to the cross choosing to delight in delighting us with the glory of his Father and the joy of his presence. The cross towers above and beyond every cheap imitation of love and boldly declares: “Here is the one true love which will satisfy every soul who dares abandon all other “loves” for the sake of knowing the one surpassing love of God in Jesus Christ.”

Does not such passionate love beg your soul to come and share in its glory?

4.5. *The Motive of Love (1John 4.11)*

Notice carefully what the text tells us about why we ought to love others. It is because “God so loved us.”

When you consider the difficulty of putting off selfishness and other self-seeking counterfeits of love, and the death to self which must accompany putting on the love of Christ, simply acknowledging that you *ought* to do it is not enough. Instead, we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that, instead of believing that happiness comes from having my needs met, I truly believe that happiness comes from having Jesus meet others’ needs through me.

How do I know that is true? How do I know that indifference never brings happiness?
How do I know that self-sacrifice brings true joy?

Because Jesus delighted in giving that love for me!

He who was rich, for our sakes became poor. He who was equal with God, made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, suffering on the cross. He who had infinite glory and wealth and honor and praise, sacrificed it all because of His love for people. Jesus delighted to love His people with Gospel love.

And now He gives you this wonderful promise: we who reject the passing pleasures of selfishness and who instead delight to love with a Gospel love, find the same joy which sustained Christ all the way to the cross. For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorning the shame, and has set down at the right hand of the throne of God. The fruit of the Spirit is love, and such love is the way to glory!

5. Conclusion

How do we actually do this? Six steps to show the way.

R A P B A T

Read the command in the Bible to love

Admit that you cannot do this apart from Christ

Pray for God’s grace and Christ to love through you

Believe the promise that those who are in Christ can do his will

Act in faith, loving as Christ would have you, both delighting in the other as well as delighting to delight them

Thank God for the grace given

Stephen Olford tells of a pastor during the American Revolution, Peter Miller, who was a friend of George Washington. In Miller’s town also lived Wittman, an angry fellow who did all he could to oppose and humiliate the pastor. One day Wittman was arrested for treason and sentenced to die. Peter Miller traveled seventy miles on foot to Philadelphia to plead for the life of the traitor.

“No, Peter,” General Washington said. “I cannot grant you the life of your friend.”

“My friend!” exclaimed the old preacher. “He’s the bitterest enemy I have.”

“What?” cried Washington. “You’ve walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy?”

That puts the matter in different light. I’ll grant your pardon.” And he did.

Miller took Wittman home—no longer an enemy but a friend.