

CHRISTIANITY (*defined*)
A Study of 1 John
“The Greatest Love of All”
1 John 4:7-16

Pastor David O. Dykes, Green Acres Church, Tyler, Texas, April 25, 2021

INTRODUCTION: I borrowed this title from the hit song sang by Whitney Houston. She had a great voice. Nobody could belt out Dolly Parton’s “I will always love you” like Whitney could. She seemed to have a different singing gear that she could shift into. Whitney grew up singing in her home church, New Hope Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey. Her first solo at age 11 was “Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah.” She went on to be one of the greatest singers of all time, selling over 200 Million records world-wide.

The *Greatest Love of All* which she recorded in 1985, became a number-one hit worldwide. If you recall the lyrics said: **“I found the greatest love of all; Inside of me; The greatest love of all; Is easy to achieve; Learning to love yourself; It is the greatest love of all.”**

She didn’t write those words, and looking back on her troubled marriage to Bobby Brown and her death at age 48 from a drug overdose, it would seem that she had lost that sense of self-love. But I don’t want to remember Whitney by the way she died. I want to remember her singing songs of faith in the Movie *The Preacher’s Wife*.

Those closest to Whitney said that although she lost her way, that she never lost her faith which she professed in her youth. She learned at a very young age that the greatest love isn’t what she sang about in that song. She knew that the greatest love greatest love of all is God’s love for us.

Let’s read about the Greatest Love in 1 John 4:7-16: **Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his one and only Son into the world so that we might live through him. Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning**

sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us in this way, we also must love one another. No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God remains in us and his love is made complete in us. This is how we know that we remain in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and we testify that the Father has sent his Son as the world's Savior. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God—God remains in him and he in God. And we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us.

1 John 4 is really the love chapter of the Bible. Most people call the beautiful section of 1 Corinthians 13 the love chapter, but the word *agape* only appears nine times in 1 Corinthians 13. In 1 John 4, *agape* appears twenty-seven times. More times than any other chapter in the New Testament. Let's notice three important elements of the Greatest Love.

1. THE PRIORITY OF GOD'S LOVE. Many people believe that God exists, but the nature of the God you believe in is what matters. James writes "You believe that there is one God? Big deal. Even the demons believe in God and tremble." And the demons should tremble because they are part of Lucifer's rebellion against God and their fate of destruction is sealed – it's only a matter of time.

But the sad thing is that many people have the same belief in God. They think that He is some horrible Divine force to be only feared. And they spend their lives trying to avoid His anger.

But that's not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is a loving God who wants to have a personal love relationship with you. That's the most important truth you will ever discover. Notice two dynamics about God's Love.

(1) Love is the nature of our Father. The Apostle John knew a lot about love. In fact, in the Gospel according to John, he is called the beloved disciple, the disciple whom Jesus loved. Now Jesus loved all the disciples, but he had a special love for John. How is it that God can especially love some people? Is it because God is impartial in his love? Does God look out upon a congregation and say, "Oh, I'm going to love you more than I love her"? No. A parent who has more than one child

loves all of their children equally. But let's face it. There are some children who just receive your love better. They may be one who just lavishes in your love. They allow you to love them more than the other one does. An outward observer might say, "Oh, you love that child more than you love the other child." And that's not true at all. You love them equally, but one allows you to love them more. And the same is true with God's love. God loves everyone in this world equally. But there are some people who allow him to love them more.

I remember being a Boy Scout on a camping trip one time. We were camped beside a lake that had a small stream flowing into it. One of my friends had an idea. He said, "Let's hike up to find the source of this stream." So we noticed the direction of the current, and started hiking upstream. We hiked for what seemed like four or five hours – but was really only about an hour. We were afraid it was going to get dark and we'd get lost so we followed the stream back down to our campsite. We never found the source of the stream. I'm sure if we had persevered, we would have found some water bubbling out from underground that was the headwaters of that little stream that flowed into the lake.

Over the last two centuries explorers in South America have claimed to have located the source of the Amazon River. But over twenty different expeditions have made different claims, so the true source of the largest river in the world is still a mystery.

But we don't have to wonder about the source of love. If you were to trace back the stream of love in this world to its source, I'll tell you where you would find where love bubbles out. Love itself comes from God and God is love. It is the nature of the Father to love. In 1 John 3:1 we read, "**Behold what manner of love the Father has for us. That we should be called God's children.**"

(2) Love is the nature of our Family. The Bible says in verse seven that whoever loves has been born of God. One of the themes of this book is how you can KNOW with a doubt that you are born again. One of the greatest proofs of your new birth is that you have love for others. We love like our Father loves.

You and I inherit certain physical traits from our biological parents. In the same way, when you are a child of God, you inherit the Father's love.

In 1998 Eric Clapton released a song entitled, **"My Father's Eyes."** But long before that, in 1979 Amy Grant sang a song called, "My Father's Eyes." I remember hearing it for the first time. I was driving in my car and when I started listening to the lyrics, I had to pull over to listen to them because they were so powerful. She sang: **"I may not be every mother's dream for her little girl; and my face may not grace the mind of everyone in the world: but that's all right as long as I can have one wish I pray. When people look at me. I want to hear them say: She's got her Father's eyes; her Father's eyes. Eyes that find the good in things; when good is not around; eyes that find the source of help; when help just can't be found. Eyes full of compassion, seeing every pain. Knowin' what you're going through and feeling it the same."** When you know Jesus you will reflect the Father's love to your family of Faith.

2. THE PROOF OF GOD'S LOVE. Have you ever told somebody, "I love you" and they said, "Well, prove it"? We have so many ideas about what love is and what love isn't. Some of you from my generation can remember going to see the sappy movie LOVE STORY. It was the source of that that ridiculous statement from a love: "love means never having to say you're sorry." That saying became so popular it appeared on bumper stickers, billboards, and t-shirts. But true love is just the opposite. True love means that you say you are sorry and real love is always forgiving. In this passage we see two ways God proved His love. **(1) He proved it by sending Jesus to rescue us.** I recall once hearing a small child misquote John 3:16. They said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only forgotten Son." It's not "forgotten." The word is "begotten." What does it mean? It is the Greek word "monogene." It's a combination of two words. "Mono" meaning "one" and "genes" is where we get our word "generation." It means birth. It means it's a "one and only kind of birth."

Jesus Christ was born different than any other man. You were born the same way I was born. You had an earthly father and an earthly mother.

None of us are *monogene*. The only person who could ever say their birth was unlike any other birth is Jesus Christ of Nazareth. He had a *heavenly* Father and an earthly mother.

During WEBS we've been studying all the miracles of the Bible. Last Wednesday evening, Pastor Michael taught about the miracle of the Virgin Birth. He said that belief in the Virgin Birth is absolutely critical in establishing the Deity of Jesus.

Sometimes people ask me, "Is it really essential to believe in the Virgin birth of Jesus?" I say it is absolutely essential, because when you remove the Virgin birth of Jesus Christ, you're saying, "Jesus had an earthly father and he had an earthly mother. He just *became* somebody special – He became the Messiah." No, God showed His love by sending His unique Son to rescue us from our sinful condition. It was the most important rescue mission of history. Jesus said, "**The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.**" (Luke 19:10)

(2) He proved it by sacrificing Jesus to redeem us. Look at verse ten. The Bible says, "Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." The two words, "atoning sacrifice" is only one word in Greek. It's the word *hilasmon*. In the pagan religions, the whole point to try to keep the gods from noticing you and causing you trouble. So the worshippers made all kinds of sacrifices to keep the gods happy. Happy god happy life. They would often make all kinds of food offerings to the gods. But at certain locations, like Caesarea Philippi, to keep the god Pan happy, the worshippers would sacrifice a live virgin every spring. And you wanted to keep Pan happy because when Pan wasn't happy, there would be chaos. That's where we get our word "panic."

At this location, there was a temple to Pan and it was built over a huge cave where thousands of gallons of water flowed out from the side of the mountain. This was called the Gate to Hades – the underworld. Each spring the priests of Pan would stand above the gushing water and throw a virgin in as a sacrifice to appease Pan, and the other gods of the underworld. If the poor girl resurfaced, they believed Pan had rejected the sacrifice, so they would make another sacrifice. The word for these

pagan sacrifices is the same word in 1 John 4:10 – the word *hilasmon* “atoning sacrifice.”

In Matthew 16 Jesus took His disciples to this very spot of pagan sacrifice and said, “Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hades will not prevail against it.”

So consider this. In the ancient world thousands of sacrifices were made to hundreds of false gods just to keep them happy. But when Jesus came, it was just the opposite. It wasn't the worshippers making a sacrifice to a god. It was God making a sacrifice for the people. Jesus became our substitute sacrifice to make atonement for our sins.

Paul described it this way in Romans 5:8, **“But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** God didn't say, “Okay, clean up your lives and then I'll send Jesus to die for you.” He sent Jesus to die for us while we were still sinners. That's the greatest proof of God's love. The night before the cross Jesus said, **“Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends.”** (John 15:13)

It's not that God saw anything good in us that deserved His love. That's what grace is – God loving us in spite of our sins.

3. THE PRACTICE OF GOD'S LOVE. I've said before that at the end of every sermon, there should be a “So what?” Okay, God's love for us is the greatest love, “So what?” What is the practical take-away from this passage? It's simple. It's found in verse 11. **“Since God so loved us, we ought to love one another.”** When it comes to loving others, remember two important truths:

(1) He gives us the command to love others. At the Last Supper, Jesus said, “I'm giving you guys a new commandment. Just as I have loved you, love one another.” There are the Ten Commandments, but this is like the 11th Commandment and it supersedes the Ten Commandments. How do people know that we're Christians? If you wear a cross around your neck? If you have a “Honk, if you love Jesus” bumper sticker? If you carry a big Bible around? No! It's not a baptismal certificate. It's not memorizing a thousand scriptures. The Bible says the one sign of a Christian is if you have love one for another.

Verse twelve says that no one has seen God, but when we love one another, that's when people can see God through the love expressed by His children. Yesterday, we hosted another FEED OUR FRIENDS event. Over the past three months hundreds of our members showed up to give free groceries to thousands of people in East Texas. As these people drove through our parking lot, some of them had to wonder, "Why are these people doing this?" There is one reason. God loves us and we want to show God's love to you in a practical way. That's how they see that God is real. Every time you show someone the love of God you are living proof of the existence of a loving God.

George Truett was pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas for 47 years. In one of his sermons he told the story about a little boy on the streets of NYC who was trying to help his family during the Great Depression. Every day, the boy would buy twelve apples for a dime. Then he would set them on a piece of wood and sell them for a penny a piece. On a good day, he would make two cents profit to help his family. Dr. Truett said one day, a man came by and accidentally knocked over the table and the boy's apples fell to the sidewalk rolled to the curb. The man kept on walking, and the little boy rushed to gather his bruised apples. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he looked at his ruined inventory. A man who had seen what happened walked up to the boy and said, "How much are the apples?" The little boy said, "They are usually a penny a piece, but since they are so bruised, I'll sell them to you for two for a penny." The man reached into his wallet and handed the boy a ten-dollar bill. He said, "Keep the change. And the apples." The little boy was so shocked that he asked, "Mister, are you God?" The man smiled, and said, "No son, I'm just one of His children." When people see a person demonstrating God's love, that's the only picture of God they may ever get. Go out and let people see God in you this week.

(2) He gives us the capability to love others. Let's face it, some people are easy to love. They are so loving that it's like hugging a teddy bear. But other people are hard to love. They are more like porcupines than teddy bears. In fact there's a great book entitled *Porcupine People*. In it, Lee Ezell writes: "**Love is an unconditional commitment to an**

imperfect person. That perfectly describes God's love for us; an unconditional commitment on His part, to us, the imperfect person."

In our sinful state, we are unlovely to God, but He loves us. So, it is only by His power that we can show love to those porcupine people. It's easy to love people who love you, who treat you well, and who shower you with love, affection, and compliments. They are easy to love. You don't need any supernatural power to do that. But when people treat you like dirt, and are unkind toward you, it's not easy to love them. It's hard. In fact, it's impossible. But that's why God gives us a supernatural resource to love unlovely people. In verse 13 we're reminded that He is IN us and He has given us His Spirit. The first fruit of the Holy Spirit is love. Let's get very practical here. Have you thought of somebody that you've been having a hard time loving? Don't try to love them yourself. Just say, "Holy Spirit of God who lives in me, I know that you have all the love of God that I need. Please give me some of that...the love of God. And let me share that love with that person." By surrendering to the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus can love that person through you.

CONCLUSION: One of the most influential theologians of the Twentieth Century was the German scholar, **Karl Barth**. He was a prolific writer who explored the interaction between faith and culture. He opposed Hitler and refused to sign an oath of loyalty and was deported to Switzerland.

In 1962 the great theologian was touring the United States. One night after a lecture in Chicago, he was answering questions from this audience. One attendee asked the question, "In your opinion, what is the essence of the Christian faith?" Barth pondered for a few minutes, and everyone expected his answer to be some deep theological maxim. Instead, he looked up and said, I can summarize the Christian faith in these words: "**Jesus loves me this I know; For the Bible tells me so.**" Of course, that's the simple song that we all learned as children. But those simple words describe the **Greatest Love of All**.

Let's circle back to **Whitney Houston**. Two nights before she died she was called on stage to sing at a Hollywood nightclub. Nobody knew that it would be her last performance. So what song did she sing? She sang,

“Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong. They are weak, but he is strong.” That was her last performance. I’ve been singing that song since I was a child. But the older I get, the more assured I am that God loves me.

In fact, I came across a different version of that famous song. That adds some verses for us senior citizens. These words were added by C.D.

Frey: Jesus loves me, this I know, Though my hair is white as snow; Though my sight is growing dim, Still He bids me trust in Him. Though my steps are, oh, so slow; With my hand in His I’ll go; On through life; let come what may, He’ll be there to lead the way. When the nights are dark and long, In my heart He puts a song, Telling me in words so clear, “Have no fear for I am near.” When my work on earth is done; And life’s victories have been won; He will take me home above; To the fullness of His love.

A little boy was feverishly drawing a picture. His mother said, “Son what are you drawing?” He said, “I’m drawing a picture of God.” She said, “But nobody knows what God looks like.” He looked up and said, “But they soon will.” Nobody has seen God, but when you demonstrate His love to others, they get a great picture of who God really is.