

MANUSCRIPT OUTLINE: 1 John 4:7-12

The Preeminence of Love

by Peter Craig

INTRODUCTION

As a kid, I grew up in Illinois in the middle of nowhere. My hometown was about 400 people and I lived two miles outside that town in a house overlooking the Mississippi River bottoms. Occasionally, my Uncle would come to visit from North Carolina and he was awestruck by the beauty of the area. The cornfields, the woods, and especially the Mississippi River. He loved it and it totally confused me... "What did he see? It's just miles and miles of corn." Years later, after living in Texas for some time, we traveled back to Illinois in the summer and I finally got it. As we all know, Texas can be pretty brown and dry at that time, but Illinois is lush...almost neon green. Texas rivers are lovely, yes, but the Mississippi River...now that's a river. Suddenly, something so familiar became more beautiful and meaningful than ever before. This is what I want for us this afternoon.

Consider these truths, "Love one another", "God is love", "God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through him." These verses carry so much power, depth, and beauty, yet at the same time, they're so incredibly familiar. If you've spent any time in church or have ever browsed the wall decor aisles at Hobby Lobby, you know these verses. Is it possible for these familiar truths to become meaningful, even life-changing, to us again? Honestly, I know my words won't be able to do it. We desperately need the Lord's help. So I am going to pray, but I am also going to ask you to join me in prayer and plead with the Holy Spirit to open your hearts as we examine three ideas: The Preeminence of Love, The Way of Love, and The Perfection of Love. Let's pray.

INTRO PRAYER

The Preeminence of Love

1. Family Resemblance

- a. **ILLUSTRATION:** When Erin and I discovered that we were pregnant, there was a lot of excitement. Our daughter would be the first grandchild on either side of the family, so the anticipation was through the roof. The day Ellie was born, grandparents, aunts, and uncles flocked to see her at the hospital and very quickly they began examining her to see what side of the family she resembled. Whose eyes does she have? Whose face? I'm sure we've all done this at some point. When a child is born and grows up, there is something in us that can't help, but seek out a resemblance. Who do they look like? What defining characteristics do they have that point them to their parents?

- i. 1 John 4:7 begins in a similar tone, but instead of the Apostle John seeking out a resemblance between Christians and God, He is boldly commanding us to resemble God in a very important way.

b. **Verse 7: "Beloved, let us love one another..."**

- i. John is echoing Jesus' command to His disciples the night He was betrayed. Of course, they would have heard Jesus teach a lot about love.
 1. He taught them to love God above all, to love their neighbor, and even to love their enemies. But this, Jesus said, was a new command. Yes, love the people in the world, but pay special attention to love your brothers and sisters in the faith as well.

- ii. Jesus used His last moments with His disciples to share this command because He was about to be crucified. He would leave, but the dangers of the world would remain. He wanted them to take care of each other the way He had cared for them.
- c. So why is John repeating this command here?
 - i. Christians were certainly struggling at this time, but in this case, John is commanding followers of Christ to love each other, not because it was needed or good (both are true), but because it's who they are. **"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God."**
- d. The Apostle John is urging those of us who place our faith in Jesus to be who we're born to be. You were born of God, so resemble God. And what does God look like? Let's recall the ministry of Jesus. Scripture says that He, **"loved His own who were in the world, (and) he loved them to the end."** (1 John 13:1)
 - i. God looks like love. In fact, God doesn't *just look* like love...in verse 8, John blows the roof off the place by declaring something stunning, **"God is Love"**.
- e. Please don't simply glance past this truth and miss the depths of it because it's so familiar. Gaze with me and absorb the vista that John is presenting to us. God...is...love.
 - i. He's not simply a god who loves or even a god who distributes love. The claim John is making is much more exclusive and revelatory.
 - 1. God's very nature is love. His motivation is love. His creative purpose is love. He is the authority on love.
 - ii. Of course, we know from Scripture that God isn't only love. He's holy, just, righteous, sovereign, and all powerful. But if we begin to peel back the layers of these truths about God, we would see that they're all informed and fueled by the immensity of His love. It's who He is and therefore it's who, we as His children, should be.

2. Nature and Nurture

- a. **ILLUSTRATION:** This past week, my parents came into town to visit. If you were to hang out with them for any length of time, you would begin to recognize where I come from. I have my mom's sense of humor and perspective on life. She's always looking to tell stories, laugh, and tease. That's me. My dad, on the other hand, is a thinker and a doer. He's creative and is always striving to make something new. That's me as well. These are defining characteristics of my parents and, because of that, they have become defining characteristics of me.
 - i. This is why John is calling us to love. Because love is from God and God is love. As the saying goes...like Father, like sons and daughters.
 - ii. And just to be clear, John isn't saying that our love earns our place in God's family, but more that it *reveals* our place in His family. He shares, **"...whoever loves has been born of God and knows God."** In a way, it's both God's nature and nurture working in us.
- b. When a person places their faith in Jesus, God's Spirit enters into their life. Like it was shared on Easter, they become a new creation...born of God by the Holy Spirit. What fruit is then born in them? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and the list goes on.
 - i. The reality is, God's very own loving nature is given to us by His Spirit. Otherwise, we could never possibly love.
- c. Does this mean, we should be love experts as soon as we place our faith in Jesus? No. The very command John gives here proves that it's a process of growth that's required.

We need reminders and encouragement like this. We must know God to love, but we also must grow in God to love.

- i. **ILLUSTRATION:** Our daughter, Ellie, was born with a desire to create and has an innate artistic ability. We saw this in her at a very young age. But overtime, she's had to hone those skills with practice, failure, learning from others, failing again, and her journey continues. She's growing as an artist.
- d. Similarly, we need to develop and mature in love, but it takes time, humility, repentance, and, above all, the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.
 - i. **ILLUSTRATION:** I'll be honest, as love goes, I actually feel like I'm in grade school at times. I've served as an elder at City Life for the past five years and God has shown me that, at times, I've walked into counseling sessions with a grumbling heart and I've seen people as problems to be fixed, rather than family to be served. But the more God has revealed His grace and kindness towards me in His Word and through this church, the more I've seen the seed of love that the Holy Spirit has placed in my heart blossom and bear fruit.
 - ii. I love, but I also struggle to love and need the Lord's help daily. It's both nature and nurture. As a Mandalorian might say, "This is the way."

3. Love is the Priority

- a. Now if it's true that those who love, know God, then the haunting reality of verse 8 is also true, **"Anyone who does not love does not know God..."**
 - i. Again, take a moment to feel the weight of this statement. Don't dismiss it. Gaze upon the landscape being revealed here. It's no wonder that the Apostle John is so focused on love in His letter to the church.
 - ii. Our love for each other (or lack of love) is revelatory. It speaks a sobering truth. Our love for one another is a reflection of our relationship with God. If there's no reflection or resemblance, there's no relationship. Some prayerful assessment might be needed.
 1. The reality is our love for each other in this church is a neon sign revealing to whom we belong. Jesus Himself taught this in John 13, **"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."**
- b. So, let me begin again and personalize John's appeal in verse 7, **"Beloved, brothers and sisters...City Life Church...let us love another..."**
 - i. Love isn't optional within the family of God. It's not a gift of the Spirit where we each have a different role to play. It's a fruit. No matter if you teach, lead, serve, or give, we are all called to love. In fact, 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us that all the gifts are worthless if they're not rooted in love.
- c. Now, we're not going to do this perfectly, please don't hear that. I don't want to encourage us towards perfection in our own strength. That would mean paralysis. But I do want to encourage us to prioritize love.
 - i. Loving one another in the church shouldn't be a side hustle. Something you try to squeeze in during the week if you have the time. Considering the gravity of these two verses alone, it should be one of our highest priorities.
- d. As one commentator states, **"I do not hesitate to say that the ultimate test of our profession of the Christian faith is, I believe, this whole question of our loving one another." (Life in Christ - Martyn Lloyd-Jones)**
 - i. Our love for one another should be preeminent, because it is preeminent to our Heavenly Father. It's who He is.

1. So let me ask: Is love for your church family a priority in your life? Really think about it.
- e. Is it something you are asking God to help you with during the week? Is it something you even think about at all? What might it look like if we took this command to love one another to heart?

The Way of Love

1. What is Love?

- a. So we talked about the preeminence of love, but the question remains. If we are commanded to love one another, then what should this love look like?
 - i. Now, there are many expressions of love we could talk about. Cultures throughout the centuries have handed down stories, songs, poems, and plays, but what are a few of the ways our modern culture expresses love?
- b. Love by Word:
 - i. First, and maybe most often, we see love expressed through words. This is a person who might actually have genuine concern for others, but it's often more talk than deed, and exhibits little to no investment in other people's lives. They may even say many of the right things, but they resist drawing near to others out of risk of discomfort, inconvenience, or fear of failure. It's like fast food, it's quick, easy, and seems nourishing, but doesn't quite hold up.
 1. Sadly, this sort of love has found its way into the church. A few years ago, my sister's husband was diagnosed with colon cancer at the age of 39. My sister would share her heartache and fear with other Christians and the response she would often get was, "Oh, I'm sure he's going to be just fine. Don't worry." It was well-intentioned and sounded good, but in her words, "It felt hollow." It's like she wasn't even being heard or known.
- c. Love by Allowance:
 - i. Now, another expression of love that we see in our culture is revealed primarily through allowance or permission. Loving and serving another person means to affirm whatever that person feels even if it might be harmful to them. Unfortunately, there's little resistance or tension in this way of love. They might draw closer to people than our first example of loving by word, but they only approve and rarely oppose. This sort of love encourages a "You do you" way of life without considering the long term effects of "them being them".
 1. This also shows up in the church when we don't confront each other in our sin. We might sympathize with a person's feelings, desires, or even temptations, but rarely challenge them with God's Word.
- d. Love by Strength:
 - i. Finally, there is a love that's much more practical that we see in our culture. You could say, it's our heavyweight category. It's a love that's revealed in true service and sacrifice. It's something we might see from mothers caring for their sick children to elderly couples serving each other to the very end. This love is attractive in many ways, because it's generous and servant-hearted.
 1. We saw this during the pandemic. Doctors and nurses who risked their lives to serve others. It's not just lip-service or allowance, but it does have limits because it's based on people's own capacity and strength.

Parent's need rest, doctors burn out, loved ones die. Even the best examples of this kind of love, at some point, run out of gas.

- e. The truth is, we need a love that's better than what our hollow words, wholesale affirmation, or finite strength can offer. John reveals this kind of love in verse 9...

2. God's Love

a. Personal and Present Love

- i. **Verse 9: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world..."**

- 1. First and foremost, God acted on His love for humanity. True love isn't simply expressed in word or sentiment. God's love was made manifest among us. He didn't beam down good vibes from Heaven. He sent the costliest thing imaginable. God, the Father, sent His only Son into the world.

- ii. We see here that God's love is personal and present. It's not just talk. It's action and investment. It gets dirty in the muck and mire of sin and suffering. God's love draws near even to the most challenging of personalities.

- 1. When you think about your city group, maybe there are some names and faces that come to mind that you just can't quite connect with. They may only talk about themselves and rarely listen. Their opinions and struggles can become a black hole that pulls in everything around them. You might often be tempted not to go to group because it's uncomfortable and seems like work. You might think, "I'm going to end up having to talk with that person. That's exhausting. Staying home sounds more comfortable."

- iii. Let the example of God's Love revealed in the humanity of Jesus confront those self-centered instincts.

- 1. Out of His obedience and love for the Father, Jesus left the comfort and perfection of Heaven to enter into a cruel and uncomfortable world that was dead set on rejecting Him from His first moments of life. A world that even refused His teenage, pregnant mother a decent room to have her child.
- 2. You see, love enters into the uncomfortable. Look at Jesus' ministry. Everywhere He went, He was misunderstood, gossiped about, and mocked. People flocked to get something from him, but now truly know Him. Even the people that genuinely loved Him failed to understand him time and time again.

- iv. But God's love compelled Jesus to stand at eye level, even at bended knee, to know and relate to us broken, selfish, suffering sinners.

- 1. God sent His only Son into the world to love in both word and deed. You see, God's love relates to others and steps willingly into inconvenience and discomfort to sympathize with us and suffer for us.

b. Selfless and Sacrificial Love

- i. John continues unpacking God's love in **Verse 10: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."**

- ii. There is so much to say about this, it's hard to know where to begin, but at the highest level, God's love is completely selfless.

- 1. **ILLUSTRATION:** There have been times when I've told my daughters that I love them and I don't get a response. So I think to myself,

“Obviously, they must’ve not heard me.” So I try again, louder and more clearly, until I hear the response I’m looking for, “Yeah, Dad. I love you too.” So why do I sometimes tell my daughters that I love them? Well, first, I actually really do love them. But on some occasions, I say it because I want to hear that they love me. I am looking for love for myself, instead of truly sharing my love with them. In that moment, it’s a self-centered love.

- iii. Unlike me, Jesus entered into the world with a heart to selflessly pour out His love for others. Was He in short supply of love? No. He had perfect love and communion with the Father and Spirit from the very beginning.
 - 1. He came to give, not because we had anything to offer or did anything to deserve it. John’s pretty clear about that, “**...not that we have loved God but that he loved us.**”
 - iv. And unlike a love expressed through affirmation and permission. God’s love is confrontational and challenges our sinful instincts.
 - 1. Consider the sermon on the mount, or pretty much any other teaching by Jesus. He came into a world of darkness and deception to bring Light and Truth. “You do you” was not His message. Whether it was the Pharisees, tax collectors, or His very own disciples, the message was the same, “Turn from you and return to God.”
 - v. True love...God’s love...is selfless, confrontational in the best sense, and because of that, it’s sacrificial. Jesus came not to affirm our sin, but to confront it head-on at the expense of His own life.
 - 1. Think about it. Jesus entered into the world in a feeding trough and ended His life on a cross for us. **Now, that’s true love.**
 - vi. What might it look like for us to share *this* type of love with one another? When you hear someone in the church justify their anger towards a spouse or coworker, are you affirming them or shrugging it off? When someone starts gossiping about another person or complaining to you, are you entertaining it, or are you following Christ’s example and sacrificing your comfort to confront them in love and in truth?
 - 1. **ILLUSTRATION:** I have the honor of being in a few discipleship groups where, I’m happy to share by God’s grace, our friendship and laughter is also often seasoned with holy discomfort and loving confrontation. Why? Because we are in God’s Word and seeking to keep each other near to our Savior. Our natural tendency in the flesh is to run the other way. I am so thankful to have brothers who ask me the hard questions, follow up, and resist my old man when he rears his ugly head.
- c. Life-giving and Eternal Love
- i. So God’s love is personal and present, selfless and sacrificial, and finally we see in verse 9 that it’s ultimately life-giving and eternal.
 - 1. **Verse 9: “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.**
 - ii. One argument a person might have with the claim that God is Love is the fact that there have been many acts of seemingly selfless and sacrificial love throughout history by people who didn’t know God.

1. Have people given their lives to save others? Absolutely and that's beautiful. But I simply want to propose to you that there's only been one act of love that is, in the deepest and truest sense, life-giving.
2. **ILLUSTRATION:** Last Fall, my dad went in for a check up on his heart and they discovered he needed emergency quadruple bi-pass surgery. They wouldn't even let him leave the hospital. I quickly flew back to Illinois to see him before the procedure. I desperately wanted to serve and encourage him, but when I got there, I discovered a much better love was already taking care of him. The truth is, this kind of surgery offers no real guarantees. A person could easily die. But even moments before they rolled my dad down the hallway to stop his beating heart, there was no bit of fear in him. There was only peace and hope, confidence and laughter even. How could this be? It's because he was trusting in the life-giving love of Jesus that, unlike the best expressions of love the world has to offer, cleanses us of our sins and gives us eternal life. Even the threat of death itself couldn't shake my dad because of the eternal love and work of Jesus. It was honestly beautiful.
 - iii. This is the type of love that we should be pointing each other toward. Not a "til death do us part" kind of love, but a death-defeating, resurrection kind of love that's greater than anything our strength or capacity could ever offer. A love that never tires out or leaves you on your own. A love that goes into surgery with you when no one else can.
 1. This reality should be a huge encouragement to us as we strive to love one another, because God's love doesn't wear out when we do. So we can love and serve others, but also rest knowing that the people we're caring for are ultimately in God's much more capable hands.
 2. So when we love each other, City Life, let's make sure our love points to God and His life-giving love revealed in Christ. When we serve each other, let's remind ourselves who served us first. When we sacrifice for each other, let's remind each other of Christ's ultimate sacrifice for us.

3. John's Credentials.

- a. It's no wonder that the Apostle John is so passionately sharing these truths about God's love. He knows just how life-changing this love can be. He had the stunning privilege of experiencing it firsthand. Imagine with me...
 - i. John was literally known as "the disciple whom Jesus loved". He heard Jesus' teaching with his own ears. He knew the tenor of His voice. He watched Jesus heal outcasts, the demon possessed, and the servant of a centurion. He witnessed Jesus' patience as he was mocked, entrapped, and used by people for his food and fame.
 - ii. John had a front row seat when Jesus calmed the winds and the waves, walked on water, raised the dead, and washed his dirty feet. John was on the mountain to see Jesus transfigured in glory and was at the foot of the cross to witness Him crucified in agony for us. God in glory. God in agony. He saw both.
 - iii. A few days later, he was among the first to see the empty grave and absorb the realities of a true life-giving love.
- b. Church, this Apostle...knows...love. Let's listen to our brother and heed his words as he tenderly sets his sights back on us.

The Perfection of Love

1. Love Starts with Knowing

- a. In verse 11, John returns to his original command once again, but this time, he makes it personal. **Verse 11: “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”**
 - i. Now when you hear this appeal again in light of all we’ve discussed, your first instinct might be to want to immediately run out and start loving people in your own strength. Sort of a “Okay, I got it. I can do better. Let’s go love.” But let’s slow down and consider again what’s being said. Listen to John’s words, “...**if God so loved us...**”
- b. The love that John has just unpacked for us in these last few verses isn’t *first* an example for you to follow, but a love for you to experience and enjoy.
 - i. You’ve heard it a million times, but I’m going to say it once again. God loved you so much that He sent His only Son...His perfect, blameless, sinless Son, into the world to die for you.
 1. Not the generic church. Not Christians in general, but you. (Names). God’s love for you is as personal as it gets.
 2. Jesus died to save you from your pride, your indifference, your lust, gossip, anger, apathy, love of money, people pleasing, and the list could go on and on...you have to fill in the blanks for yourself. And you should.
 - a. You see, we must know the depths of our own sin to truly understand the immensity of God’s love for us and to see it overflow in our lives.
 - ii. Luke 7 shares about a woman known for her sin who hears about Jesus reclining at a table, so she rushes over to him and begins tenderly adorning his feet with kisses, ointment, and tears. People begin judging the situation and Jesus, filled with compassion for her, responds, “...**I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” (Luke 7:47)**
 1. If you want to grow in love for God and others, know yourself...name your sins. Don’t edit, redact, or whitewash them. He who is forgiven little, loves little. Be honest with yourself and, in faith, begin enjoying the immensity of God’s love for you, then boldly share that love with others.
 - iii. The truth is, we can’t begin to love God, our neighbor, or our church family unless we experience God’s love for us first. John later shares, “**We love because he first loved us.**” (1 John 4:19).
- c. Every Wednesday evening, our house is filled with people for city group. When I am believing in faith that I’m loved by God, I am freed from needing to seek love from anyone else. I don’t have to steamroll people to be heard. I don’t have to desperately hunt to be respected or admired. If I believe in faith that my cup is already full with God’s love, what else is there to do, but to let it overflow on others by listening to them, empathizing, counseling, and praying. I can love my brothers and sisters and even provide a small glimpse of their Heavenly Father’s love for them.
 - i. **ILLUSTRATION:** The good news is I see this in our church. I’ve experienced it myself. I recently went on a three-week filming trip in Mexico. These trips are exhausting physically, mentally, and spiritually. Not just for me, but for Erin as well. And while I was gone, my city group loved my family very practically. They

gave up their mornings and braved traffic to drive Ellie downtown to school. One couple gave up their Saturday afternoon to take Tirfe to her soccer game, sending us play-by-play texts throughout the game. I got messages asking me how my trip was going and how people could be praying for me. They didn't well-wish or simply "send their love" from a distance. They got uncomfortable. They sacrificed and gave life to me and my family. And when I think about them, I am reminded of God's love for me, because He abides in them.

2. Assurance and Perfection

- a. And this is where John lands his exhortation in **Verse 12: "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us."**
 - i. At first glance, this might seem like a bizarre way for John to end his exhortation on love. But as an act of kindness towards us, he is now turning his command in verse 7 into a beautiful encouragement in verse 12.
- b. The truth is, none of us have ever seen God. But when we love one another the way Jesus has loved us, that's God revealing Himself both in us and to us.
 - i. I'll be honest, I've gotten to see and hear some pretty incredible things as I've traveled to different countries to film. But my definition of what is truly extraordinary has changed since meditating on these verses.
 1. I now realize that what is truly miraculous is God's love displayed in His children. Why? Because it reveals that God Himself abides in them. What greater miracle is there than that?
 - ii. When we love one another, we are displaying to the world the very heart of our Heavenly Father. This is a miracle born of God Himself. This is how His love is perfected in us, by it flowing through us, toward one another, and out into the world.
 1. Parents, you might be able to relate to this. You teach your kids about God, you sacrifice for them, and share your love with them. It can be exhausting, but there is no greater joy than when you get to see that care and kindness finally sink into their hearts, then flow out of them towards others. In a way, your effort feels complete...perfected. This is what our Heavenly Father wants for us.
- c. So as we close, how should we respond to all of this? I know for many of you, this is a familiar landscape. It feels like I've said the word, "love" over 10,000 times in this sermon. You know these words. We've heard these commands before.
 - i. But, there might be some of you in this room who don't know God and the love that we've talked about this afternoon. If that's true for you, I would simply like to encourage you to take a step of faith and lean into this love.
 1. If you have questions about what it might mean to place your faith in Jesus, I would love to talk with you about it. Please feel free to come up after the service and let's dig in.
 - ii. Others of you might be sitting here, thinking, "Yeah, I trust in Jesus, but I struggle to love." Maybe you've been hurt badly or misunderstood. Whatever the reason is, let me encourage you to turn toward God.
 1. Remember, Jesus died for you to give you life and love. Don't try to fix yourself or give into shame. Turn from yourself, return to Him.
 2. Practically speaking, if you've distanced yourself from community and aren't around people...you're doing it wrong. We've seen today just how

important it is to know God and love each other, and both require being around your church family to do so. So let's do it.

3. Is it easy? No. It can be inconvenient and uncomfortable at times, but so was the way of our Savior. Reach out to someone, ask about getting into a city group, and follow Jesus' footsteps into each other's lives.

iii. Finally, there might be many of you who see loving each other as a side hustle. Something that you squeeze in if you have time for it. Honestly, I can easily find myself in this category. So for those of you who are like me, I would love to encourage you to pray and ask God to help you prioritize love in your life.

1. We often busy ourselves with pondering questions like, "What's God's will for my life? What is He calling me to do?" There are a lot of details and circumstances that God does indeed care about, but one thing's for certain: God's desire and purpose for you is to love no matter where you are or what you're doing. Love one another.
2. Prioritize it. Put love on the schedule if you have to. Write down people you can be loving right now and act in faith. And when you see the miracle of God's love revealed in someone in this church, call it out. Encourage love, promote it, and praise God for it. Why? Because we have been born of God and know God. It's who we are.

Let's pray