

Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Orcutt Christian Church

A Grace Driven Church for Grace Needing People!

"Come As You Are ... Leave Changed!"

Burning Questions 09

Why Is There Evil and Suffering?

2 Corinthians 1:3-7

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Saturday 3/4 Clean Up: Julia White

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John 16:31-33 (NASB)

³¹ Jesus answered them, "Do you now believe? ³² "Behold, an hour is coming, and has *already* come, for you to be scattered, each to his own *home*, and to leave Me alone; and *yet* I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. ³³ "These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 (NASB)

³ Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who

are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. ⁶ But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; ⁷ and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are *sharers* of our comfort.

You folk are asking some deep questions.
This week's question is far more difficult to answer than any you have raised over the past eight weeks.
It's THE question that never goes away!

But, I'll give it a go.

“Evil” and “suffering” are not synonyms, but they are related. For the sake of this sermon, “suffering” will refer to the physical and emotional pain experienced as a result of the moral and natural evil which exists in the world.

I think it's important to grapple with the question of why God allows suffering in our lives.
Even though we can't understand everything about it, I believe we *can* understand *some* things.

That "why" question is not a new one; it goes back thousands of years.

I suspect that the first time the question was asked was by Eve. I can imagine the wracking sobbing of Eve when she learns her son has been murdered; because I have held in my arms a woman whose son was murdered.

It was asked in the Old Testament by Job and the writers of the Psalms.

And think of the centuries of cruelty when human beings, black, white, red, yellow were held in the bondage of slavery. And, sadly, that is on going even today.

And it was especially relevant during the 20th Century, where we witnessed two World Wars, the Holocaust, genocides in the Soviet Union, Iraq and China, devastating famines in Africa, the killing fields of Cambodia, the emergence of AIDS, the genocide in Rwanda and the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo.

And the 21st Century didn't start any better. There was 9/11 and the Syrian slaughters, and on and on.

Why do all of these horrific things happen if there's a loving and powerful God?
Why do bad things happen to good people?

Several years ago, Lee Strobel commissioned a national survey and asked people what question they'd ask if they could only ask God one thing.

The number one response was: "**Why is there suffering in the world?**"

The English comedian and actor Stephen Fry, who is a self-declared atheist, was interviewed by Irish broadcaster Gay Byrne.

At one point, Byrne said to Fry, "Suppose it's all true, and you walk up to the pearly gates, and are confronted by God. What will Stephen Fry say?"

Fry responded, "Bone cancer in children; what's that about? How dare you? How dare you create a world where there is such misery that's not our fault? Why should I respect a ... God who creates a world that is so full of injustice and pain?"

That segment of the interview was soon posted on YouTube, where, within days, it was viewed over 5,000,000 times.

I. The Problem of Evil Simply Stated

At the heart of the problem is the question: "What kind of God exists?"

Reduced to its simplistic syllogism as used by those who think they have you trapped, it's stated

"God is ALL good."

"God is omnipotent."

"Evil exists."

It was stated in the fourth century BC by the Greek philosopher Epicurus as you see on the front of your bulletin:

"Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?

Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?"

When you examine the texts on philosophy and psychology, they nearly are uniform in defining "evil" in terms of human interactions.

However, that view is too narrow.

There are two kinds of evil: natural and moral.

Natural evil, sometimes called physical evil, is that which originates from natural processes or the perversion of natural processes.

Examples are genetic defects, diseases, insanity, famine, suffering, and death.

Any natural event, such as flood, lightning, earthquake, tornado, hurricane which results in suffering or death.

Moral evil is the sin or wickedness which originates in the hearts of free moral creatures, whether human beings or fallen angels, and which expresses itself in their sinful actions.

Examples are given by Paul in

Romans 1:28-31 (NASB)

28 And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, ²⁹ being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; *they are* gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful

Sometimes moral evil and natural evil may be combined into a single event.

For example, an act of murder is a moral evil on the part of the murderer which results in a natural evil, i.e., death, for the victim. Other examples are torture; rape; spouse and child abuse; drug or alcohol abuse that results in birth defects, injury, or death.

Both Epicurus and the modern sceptic imply that God is the problem.

They imply that God is responsible for the origin of evil.

How shall you and I responded to the accusation that God is responsible for evil?

II. Three Current Responses

Many inadequate answers to this problem have been suggested. Some are unacceptable because they deny the biblical God.

A. God is NOT Omnipotent

Some have rejected an all-powerful God.

He is good and does not want evil to exist, they say, but he is not able to prevent it or remove it.

This approach to evil has considerable popular appeal, as illustrated by the fact that in the early 1980s one of the general best-selling books was **Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People***.

Kushner's basic thesis is that although God is good, He simply is not omnipotent.

Thus the world sometimes gets out of His control.

Evil runs wild, and He cannot do anything about it.

But, think about that magnificent display of Christ's power:

Matthew 8:26-27 (NASB)

26 He said to them, "Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?" Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm. 27 The men were amazed, and said, "What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?"

In view of the Bible's teaching concerning the omnipotence of God and His sovereign control over all of nature and history, to say that God can do nothing about evil is simply not an option open to the Bible believer.

B. God in NOT Good

Another popular thesis is the opposite of God is not omnipotent. Others have dared to present the opposite option, that God is all-powerful but not all-good.

He can not be good and allow such horrendous evil as does exist.

When one looks at man's inhumanity to man, when you see such waste and destruction of human lives, all sweet and lovely view of God have to go.

The philosopher John Roth says "God is everlasting guilty and the degrees run from negligence to murder..."

But, Jesus counters:

Matthew 7:11 (NASB)

11 "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!"

So, this view that God is NOT Good is completely ruled out by the Bible's teaching that God is good and all-loving.

C. God Deliberately Created Evil

There are two varieties of this view that God deliberately created evil.

1. So we can appreciate the good.

Those who hold this view say how could we appreciate beauty if we never saw anything ugly?

Would we really enjoy pleasure if we never experienced pain?

However, no one since the pre-Fall Adam and Eve has had the opportunity to try to appreciate a world with only good in it.

And, while this argument addresses natural evil, it does not help us resolve the problem of moral evil.

There is no biblical support for this idea.

Nowhere in Scripture is there any suggestion that God thought we needed this kind of contrast in order to appreciate his good creation.

2. It is necessary for our spiritual growth

Another quite common but inadequate view is that God deliberately caused evil to be present in the world because it is necessary for man's spiritual growth.

This is sometimes called the "soul building" thesis.

But, you have to ask the question, "Why would God need so much evil to teach us patience?"

Dr. Bernard Ramm, I think, correctly answers this idea that evil is necessary for our soul growth.

- a. Babies, children, and animals may suffer terrible pain, but there is not spiritual good that come from their suffering.
- b. Temporary suffering may increase one's spirituality, but when suffering is prolonged, no more spiritual growth is possible.
- c. The pain may so intense that the mind is incapable of any meditating that would increase his spirituality.

Such an idea is simply inadequate philosophical speculation. Such a view must be rejected.

Moral growth does not depend upon the necessity of evil, but only on the possibility of it as an element inherent in free will. This possibility makes temptation real and the conquest of it a character-building experience.

III. The Biblical View of Why There is Evil and Suffering

Genesis 1:25 (NASB)
God saw that it was good

Six times in Genesis chapter one, Moses said about creation: **God saw that it was good**

But please notice
Genesis 1:31 (NASB)

31 God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

God created the world with neither moral evil nor natural evil existing in it; everything was originally “**very good.**”

If God created the world with neither moral evil nor natural evil, then where did they come from?

Well, the fact is God did create free-will beings for whom moral evil was a possibility.

Why did God do this?

The Bible does not give an explicit answer to this question.

But we infer from other teaching in Scripture that God’s chief purpose and desire were to have creatures who would love, serve, and glorify Him of their free choice and not by coercion or manipulation.

Remember when Jesus said:

Matthew 22:37-38 (GW)

37 Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. 38 This is the greatest and most important commandment.

That this is the most important thing we can do suggests this freely chosen love is what God desires from his creation more than anything else.

Giving His us free will was a necessary means to this end.

The capacity to freely love God, though, also requires the capacity to choose to hate and reject God.

Thus in a sense the creation of free-will beings entailed a risk.

But God was willing to risk the free choice of evil in order to have freely chosen love and worship.

Here is the extent of God’s responsibility for evil: he is responsible for its possibility, but not its actuality.

He made us free people who had the potential for choosing evil.

Sadly, we have chosen to use our free will to commit sin.

And as a consequence of this free choice, all the evil that exists in the world has come into existence, the physical as well as the moral.

It is not difficult to see how moral evil is the result of free will. Angels and men were created with the capacity to sin; some of the angels and the first human beings exercised that capacity under the permissive will of God, and moral evil became a reality.

God gave Satan and the angels free will, and they abused it to their sorrow:

Revelation 12:9 (NASB)

9 And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

So, free will can explain moral evil, but what about physical evil?

Free will can explain the presence of moral evil in the world, but how do we explain evils such as birth defects, disease, and death?

The answer is that free will is also the ultimate origin of physical evils.

Physical evils are present in the world because of sin, and sin is present because of free will.

Here is the best way to say it: all physical evils are ultimately the consequence of sin, but they do not all derive from sin in the same way.

Now, please keep in mind that I am attempting to answer our question from a strong biblical point of view.

Genesis 3:16-19 (NASB)

16 To the woman He said, "I will greatly multiply Your pain in childbirth, In pain you will bring forth children; Yet your

desire will be for your husband, And he will rule over you." 17

Then to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it'; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life. 18 "Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you will eat the plants of the field; 19 By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return."

What do we learn from this Scripture?

What are the ways in which physical evils derive from moral evil (sin)?

First and most important, the very introduction of sin into the pristine world by the first couple instilled an element of corruption into the entire cosmos that will remain until the second coming of Jesus.

Bodily disease and death, as well as a breakdown in the intended harmony between man and the physical world, are all a part of the cosmic curse.

Romans 5:12 (NASB)

12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—

Evil has been unnaturally incorporated into the very fabric of the universe.

This is the explanation for most of the individual instances of suffering that occur around us, including birth defects, disease, death, and even natural disasters.

They happen because sin has distorted nature, and the sin happened through the free-will decision of our first parents.

Maybe you've never asked why our world is infected with pain and suffering, but my guess is you have struggled with this question more than once.

The Buddhist and Hinduism approach to evil and suffering is much different than what Jesus taught.

The Buddhist explain it in terms similiar to Calvinism.

All life is **suffering**, pain, and misery, and this **suffering** is caused by selfish craving and personal desire.

Hinduism handles suffering by saying everything has a cause.

Karma is as the fundamental and universal law of cause and effect.

According to Hinduism, everybody that the is suffering is living out their karma.

The Hindu say that the if you experience and suffering it may take as many as a 1 million reincarnations for you to extract yoursel from your bad karma.

Both Buddhism and the Hinduism say that if you assist the those who are outcasts that you hinder their progress of relieving themselves of bad karma.

E Stanley Jones the Methodist missionary to India, once said,

"Hinduism explains everything, but changes nothing!

While on the other hand, Christianity explains nothing, but changes everything!"

Think about the schools, the hospitals, the improvement of women's rights, and on and on.

Unlike some other religious leaders who wrote off pain and suffering as mere illusions, Jesus was honest about the inevitability of suffering.

John 16:33 (CEV)

33 I have told you this, so that you might have peace in your hearts because of me. While you are in the world, you will have to suffer. But cheer up! I have defeated the world.

He didn't say you might~
He said it *is* going to happen.

But He said, "Don't despair. I have defeated suffering."

IV. The God Who Crys

John 11:33-35 (GW)

33 When Jesus saw her crying, and the Jews who were crying with her, he was deeply moved and troubled. 34 So Jesus asked, "Where did you put Lazarus?" They answered him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus cried.

Here is the most amazing thing about Christianity.
Jesus cried.

How the Baptist Philadelphia Confession of Faith and Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith can say God has no passion is beyond me.

God cannot overrule every evil choice of man and every evil consequence therefrom without contradicting his own purposes in creating beings with free will.

This is part of the price we pay for freedom, and which God himself pays for creating us thus.

When a child lies suffering from an incurable illness and his parents stand beside him in grief, do we think that God suffers any less than the child or his parents?

Yet God has decided that having creatures with free will is worth the price of suffering, even the suffering of sacrificing his own Son on the cross.

If we cannot penetrate the mystery of a particular experience of suffering, at least we can appreciate the fact that God is suffering with us and in his wisdom and goodness has judged the final result to be worth it.

We dropped the bomb on Japan in 1945.

The two bombings, which killed at least 129,000 people, remain, thankfully, the only use of nuclear weapons for warfare in history. 129,000 killed.

And, now think about the devastating floods in China that occurred in 1931.

4,000,000 killed.

And, think about the grief and weeping of all relatives and friends of those whom died.

Two years after we dropped the bomb, Dr. Kazoh Kitamori, who was professor of theology at Tokyo Theological Seminary, released his ground breaking book on the grief of God, *Theology of the Pain of God*.

Kitamori shared that the heart of the Gospel was to him as the "pain of God."

Interestingly, he pointed to Jeremiah "a man who saw the heart of God most deeply."

He saw in Jeremiah the "Paul" of the Old Testament.

God on the cross for Paul is God in pain in Jeremiah.

God in pain is the God who resolves our human pain by His own pain.

Jesus heals our wounds by His own:

1 Peter 2:24 (CEV)

24 Christ carried the burden of our sins. He was nailed to the cross, so that we would stop sinning and start living right. By his cuts and bruises you are healed.

The theology of the cross is theology which wonders most deeply at pain as the essence of God according to Kitamori.

It was Kitamori's hope that the Japanese mind, which had seen the deepest heart of his fellowman in pain, will come to see the deepest heart of the Absolute God in pain.

In our suffering, can we come to see the love of God?

Many people wonder: "If God has the power to eradicate evil and suffering, then why doesn't he do it?"

But there's a flaw built into the question.

Just because he hasn't done it yet doesn't mean he won't do it.

This may be one reason why God does not always answer our prayers for protection and deliverance from evil.

Sometimes he does protect and deliver us, of course; so we should never fail to pray for God's special providence in these matters.

But sometimes he does not intervene; rather he allows the affliction to occur or to continue.

Remember how Paul struggled with this?

2 Corinthians 12:8-10 (NASB)

8 Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. ⁹ And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

In these cases we must trust that the wisdom of God has discerned a higher good that will come from the affliction.

Perhaps we ourselves will observe or experience this higher good; perhaps it will take place without our ever being aware of it.

After all, God sees the whole pattern of providence while we see only small parts of it, often just the darker parts.

In such cases there is no alternative to trusting the goodness and wisdom of the Sovereign Ruler of the universe, whose wounds heal our wounds.

V. Our Choices are Bitterness or Blessings

I certainly don't want to minimize pain and suffering.
But we do need to see that we have choices.

Romans 8:16-18 (NASB)

16 The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, **17** and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him*. **18** For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Remember these words were written by the apostle Paul, who suffered through beatings and stonings and shipwrecks and imprisonments and rejection and hunger and thirst and homelessness—far more pain that most of us will ever have to endure.

we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him*

It's like the story that Anglican Bishop, Rev. Dr. Galvin Reid, tells about meeting a young man who had fallen down a flight of stairs as a baby and shattered his back.

He had been in and out of hospitals his whole life, and yet he made the astounding comment that he thinks God is fair.

Reid asked him, "How old are you?"

The boy said, "Seventeen."

Reid asked, "How many years have you spend in hospitals?"

The boy said, "Thirteen years."

The minister said with astonishment, "And you think that is fair?"

And the boy replied: "Well, God has all eternity to make it up to me."

And he will.

God promises a time when there will be no more crying, no more tears, no more pain and suffering, when we will be reunited with God in perfect harmony, forever.

Dwell at length on these words of the Apostle Paul:

1 Corinthians 2:9 (HCSB)

9 But as it is written: What eye did not see and ear did not hear, and what never entered the human mind— God prepared this for those who love Him.

What did God prepare for those who love Him?

Remember what Jesus said:

John 16:33 (HCSB)

33 I have told you these things so that in Me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world.”

Jesus offers us the two very things we need when we're hurting: peace to deal with our present and courage to deal with our future.

How?

Through his own suffering and death, he has deprived this world of its ultimate power over you.

Suffering doesn't have the last word anymore.

Death doesn't have the last word anymore.

God has the last word!

As E. Stanley Jones said, "God's ultimate answer to suffering isn't an explanation; it's the incarnation."

Does he descend into all our suffering?

Yes. In the unforgettable line of Corrie ten Boom from the depths of a Nazi death camp, "No matter how deep our darkness, he is deeper still."

Remember how Paul celebrated God's being in our struggle?

1 Corinthians 15:1-8 (NASB)

1 Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, **2** by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. **3** For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, **4** and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, **5** and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. **6** After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; **7** then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; **8** and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

Suffering is a personal problem; it demands a personal response. And God isn't some distant, detached, and disinterested deity; he entered into our world and personally experienced our pain. Jesus is there in the lowest places of our lives.

Are you broken?

He was broken, like pottery for us.

Are you despised?

He was despised and rejected of men.

Do you cry out that you can't take any more?

He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

Did someone betray you?

He was sold out.

Every tear we shed becomes his tear.

God does much more than sympathize with you in your troubles.

After all, any close friend can do that.

Any close friend can sit beside you and comfort you and empathize with you.

No, Jesus is much closer than your closest friend.

Your sufferings are his sufferings; your sorrow is his sorrow.
When you make the choice to run into his arms, here's what you're going to discover: you'll find peace to deal with the present, and you'll find courage to deal with your future.

Prayer and Invitation

Lessons

Unit 1: God's Eternal, Preserving, and Renewing Love

March 5 Lesson 1 Perfect Love

Devotional Reading: Psalm 40:1-10

Background Scripture: 1 John 4:7-19

1 JOHN 4:7-19

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. **8** Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. **9** This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. **10** This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. **11** Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. **12** No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

13 This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. **14** And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. **15** If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. **16** And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. **17** This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. **18** There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

19 We love because he first loved us.

KEY VERSE

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.—1 John 4:11

Introduction

A. First Love

Is there such a thing as mutual “love at first sight”? Psychologists debate the idea. Fans of romance endorse it. Filmmakers often employ the possibility as a plot device. Some happily married couples affirm it was true for them.

But relationships don’t usually work this way. Far more common is for one person to be attracted to another and thereby begin a courtship to convince the other. One person loves first; the other person comes to love later.

In today’s lesson, John uses this sequencing of love, but he is not writing about the romantic love that men and women have for each other. Rather, he is explaining our relationship with our loving God. He expresses this with one of the Bible’s classic verses, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

We do not need to attract God’s attention and convince him to love us. He has loved us from the start. God knows us before we are born (Psalm 139:13-16). That fact is more astonishing than even “love at first sight”!

B. Lesson Background

The three letters we call 1, 2, and 3 John name no author, but tradition attributes them to the apostle John. As he wrote those letters sometime after AD 90, he likely was the last of Jesus’ original 12 disciples still living.

At some point, John relocated from the setting of his account of Jesus (the Gospel of John), which was mainly Judea and Jerusalem. Tradition tells us that he went to Ephesus, a large, prosperous city in the western part of what is now Turkey. John became involved in the daily lives of the Christians in the area. We might say he “ministered in the trenches” where people struggled to live.

Rivals in this arena contradicted the teachings of John despite his credentials. Experienced ministers know there will be factions within a church, and some will oppose them for various reasons.

The reasons for such opposition may be valid or concocted, but the opposition is real. It can sometimes grow into outright animosity and divisiveness.

John's letters give evidence of such antagonism (3 John 9). Some of this was surely caused by false teachers whom John denounced (2 John 10), but there seems to have been other reasons too.

Perhaps the aged apostle was seen as out of touch by other leaders who wanted to take the churches in new directions (note that the six churches of Revelation 2:8-3:22 are all within 120 miles of Ephesus and its church that is addressed in 2:1-7). Responding to such impatience is an underlying tone in 1 John, for the author repeatedly returns to the unchanging, ever loving, and always faithful God as the model for relationships within the church.

One caution: John likes to use absolute statements that may seem at odds at first glance. He can say both "God is light" (1 John 1:5) and "God is love" (4:8, 16) without logical contradiction. This is a technique of his writing, and we should realize that his absolute statements about people will sometimes present us with polar opposites for effect. John, being very experienced at ministry, knew that there are shades of gray when it comes to people—their mixed motives, inconsistencies, etc. We will see John's use of the absolute style in today's lesson.

I. Goal

(1 John 4:7-12)

A. Source of Love (vv. 7, 8)

7a Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.

Dear friends, used several times in this letter, is a favorite expression of affection of John for his readers. What follows affirms that the church is the fellowship of the beloved—people who recognize and accept God's love for them as they act in love for *one another*. This is John's heart on display. The apostle, who has decades of ministry experience, knows that the mutual love he and his readers share has God as its ultimate source.

How to Say It

Ephesians Ee-*fee*-zhunz.

Ephesus Ef-uh-sus.

Judea Joo-*dee*-uh.

7b Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. This is one of John's absolute statements, so we should read with care. At first glance it may seem to say that *everyone* on earth who demonstrates love has a personal relationship with the Lord, that loving behavior is proof that a person *knows God*. But we all have known people who demonstrate love toward others and yet have no relationship with God at all.

Instead, it's the other way around: all who have been *born of God* (that is, Christian believers) are to demonstrate the love of God in their lives and relationships. The further point is that a lack of love among those who claim to be Christian indicates that their relationship with the Lord is not what it should be.

What Do You Think?

How can we demonstrate to unbelievers the difference between the love shown by God and that shown by the world? Why should we?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

With regard to motive

With regard to degree

With regard to limitations

With regard to recipients

With regard to methods

8. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

John has sometimes been called "the apostle of love," because of his frequent use of that word and concept in his writings. Indeed, some form of the word *love* occurs about two dozen times in today's lesson text alone! But the churches in and around Ephesus seem to be lacking in love. John knows that love cannot be commanded, but it can be expected. His tone is not "I order you to love your brothers and sisters in Christ or

else!” but rather “Why do you not love your fellow Christians?” This is a call for self-examination. To fail to be loving is to exclude God from one’s life, *because God is love*.

Other religions speak of love and the love of God. For example, Islam speaks of God’s mercy. But other religions would not agree with a statement as bold as *God is love* (also in v. 16). This is not merely “God is loving” or “God is capable of showing love.” And especially, it is not “love is God.” John presents a doctrinal truth that there is something essential and fundamental about the nature of God that cannot fully be explained. God did not learn how to love. God does not adopt love as a practical good. God does not merely choose to love. God is love! The implications of that statement should make our heads spin and our hearts skip beats!

VISIBLE LOVE

Because of work-related relocations, our family has experienced many seasons of “church shopping.” But even when we made correct doctrine our main criterion, we sometimes ended up in churches where biblical interpretations challenged those that we held. We have changed our thinking due to some teachings, yet we have held tightly to our understanding whenever we discovered an interpretive approach to the Bible to be deficient. We grew in both cases because we consulted God’s Word to determine whether what we held to be true matched his record of truth.

Today, we still seek sound doctrine when we need to find a new church family due to relocation. But we have added two more criteria. One considers how those of a particular church speak the name *Jesus*. Do they speak of him as they would of, say, Abraham Lincoln—as if discussing any “good” historical figure? Or does the way they say his name reflect the deep awe of love?

The other thing I look for is grace from those who serve up front during worship. Do the folks with the microphone speak about the love of God, yet also express disdain for other people or, in particular, various Christian organizations? If so, it’s a red flag.

A stress on knowledge (correct doctrine) is a good thing, but so is

an emphasis on love. And the two are related! Notice how the author connects doctrinal knowledge (“we know that”) with love in 1 John 3:14; 5:2.—V. E.

What Do You Think?

What guardrails can we erect to ensure that we do not fail to show the love Christ desires?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

At work or school

At home

When gathered with other Christians

Other

B. Demonstrator of Love (vv. 9, 10)

9. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. We might imagine John’s opponents asking the questions skeptics ask today: “How do I know that God loves me? What about all the pain in my life?” Perhaps John’s opponents try to explain the apparent mismatch of continued suffering and the doctrine of a loving God by teaching that claims about God’s loving nature are irrelevant.

We deduce from the letter that the false teachers are saying that the way to salvation is through something other than faith in a God who loves. They do not teach that Jesus came to die for our sins, but to impart secret knowledge. What matters, they say, is being given secrets and insights that allow membership in a fellowship of spiritual elites.

John’s response is to pull the reader back to the fact of history we see in the verse before us. How do we know God loves us?

Because he sent *his one and only Son* on a mission to save the world (John 3:16). John draws a direct connection between Jesus’ life and God’s love.

10. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

John teaches, though, that it is not merely the life of Jesus, but

his death that makes the difference. God did not send his Son just to teach us. He sent his Son to die for us “while we were still sinners,” the great demonstration of God’s eternal love (Romans 5:8).

This was not God’s response to people’s overtures of love. God was not obligated to humanity because people loved him dearly. To the contrary, humans repeatedly demonstrate hostility to God by sin, becoming his enemies (Romans 5:10).

John describes the intervention of Jesus as being *an atoning sacrifice for our sins*. The phrase *atoning sacrifice* means “an offering that turns away wrath.” That’s how Christ’s death takes care of our sins. The God of love is also “a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29). Jesus’ willing death satisfied sin’s penalty (see Romans 3:25, 26; 1 John 1:7; 2:2). What greater love could there be?

GOD’S ANGUISH, AND OURS

Sociologist Brené Brown shares about a crisis her community experienced when she was a child. A family in her neighborhood suffered the death of their toddler in a tragic in-home accident. Brown recalls that a speaker at the church memorial service for the child said those gathered shouldn’t grieve—that it was a time to celebrate, because this child was with God.

Brown became furious. But when she experienced a personal crisis as an adult, she returned to church. She said she went back for the wrong reasons, hoping for something like an epidural to take away life’s pain. But what she found instead was more like a midwife—someone who sits beside you through the pain.

We live with the question of how God can be love yet be in control of a world so wracked with pain. The answer has several elements; one is to realize that God himself is not unfamiliar with pain. His justice requires punishment for sin, punishment that his Son paid on the cross. In Jesus, we see God willingly entering this world of pain to rescue us. We see yet more of the love of God when we realize that he stays with us and holds us through our grief. Jesus weeps with us, and that is what we are to do with each other

(Romans 12:15). Love changes everything.—V. E.

C. Perfecter of Love (vv. 11, 12)

11. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

John moves next to the application of this great truth about the love of God. When we become fully aware of the depth and magnitude of God's unmerited love for us, how can we fail to love our brothers and sisters in Christ?

Relationships among church members can be awkward. We all do stupid or silly things, and memories can be long. When we are unsure how to relate to each other, may we remember to lead with love. Don't fake love while harboring hate. Don't withhold your love to those you feel don't love you. Lead with love and you will be acting in a godly manner.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to reflect to others the love that God shows to us?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

To those sharing our faith and values

To those ambivalent to our faith and values

To those opposed to our faith and values

12. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Since *no one has ever seen God* (compare Exodus 33:20), how can people be sure he exists? There is more than one way to answer this, and the one John offers here is that when we lead with love, we embody a characteristic of God to others in a tangible, visible manner. People experience the loving presence of God when believers act in love.

A good goal is to turn the conditional *if we love* into a concrete *when we love*. As we do, we prove God's presence in our lives. On the idea of love's being perfected, see 1 John 2:5 and (below) 4:17, 18.

II. Results

(1 John 4:13-19)

A. Gift (v. 13)

13. This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.

If we have doubts *that we live in God and he in us*, John provides the certainty: we know we are truly in fellowship with God because of the presence *of his Spirit*. This gift comes from God himself. We don't knock on the door of God's heart and ask to be let in; rather, it's the other way around (see Revelation 3:20). One implication of this fact is that loving others is not solely a matter of our determination and strength. God's indwelling Spirit assists us in leading with love.

B. Testimony (v. 14)

14. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

John and the other apostles saw God's Son in the flesh (1 John 1:1). Jesus is the focus of God's love, the expression of God's love to us. God proves his love to us by sending *his Son* to save the world (John 3:16). We prove our love to God by believing John's testimony and by replicating God's love to others.

C. Refuge (vv. 15, 16)

15, 16. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

John now ties three things together: (1) our confessed belief *that Jesus is the Son of God*, (2) the mutual dwelling of God in us (through his Spirit) and we in God (through our faith), and (3) the uniting factor of *love*. To say *God is love* is not an

abstract concept. It is the basis for our lives.

How do we get to know God better, to have a closer relationship with him? There may be more than one answer to this, but John is teaching here that our relationship with God grows deeper when we love others. Teresa of Calcutta, the tireless servant of the poor, said of the children she served, “Each one of them is Jesus in disguise.” This outlook reflects Matthew 25:31-46, discussed below.

What Do You Think?

How can our church demonstrate love more effectively as a witness that Jesus is the Son of God?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

With actions seen primarily by fellow believers

With actions seen primarily by unbelievers

D. Fearlessness (vv. 17, 18)

17a This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment:

John now gives a standard whereby we can test the validity of our faith: our fear of judgment from God (or lack of it). If we are living out the love of God, we will be bold on God’s *day of judgment*. We have a confidence that comes from knowing we are loving like God. We will be bold rather than fearful, because we know our judgment will be positive.

John certainly remembers that Jesus gave his disciples a picture of final judgment that must have surprised them. Jesus taught that judgment would not be based on keeping the commandments of the law, but on loving actions that reveal faith in Christ (see Matthew 25:31-46). The Judgment Day question “Did you love?” will trump “Did you keep the law?” although the two are interrelated (Matthew 22:36-40). If we do not love, we certainly should fear judgment, for it is coming and it is sure.

What Do You Think?

How do we evangelize those who have no fear of judgment but should?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Responding to statements that begin “Surely a loving God would not ...”

Considering the role of our loving acts

Grappling with emotionally driven beliefs

Other

17b In this world we are like Jesus.

Jesus understood that he was sent to save a world that did not accept him (John 1:10, 11). We ourselves are only temporary citizens in this hostile world. As Peter wrote, we are “foreigners and exiles” (1 Peter 2:11) in a world that does not understand unselfish Christian love.

18. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

At this point in the line of thought, John does not see the opposite of *love* as hate, but *fear* (contrast 1 John 4:20). This resonates with us as we consider how often we fail to do the loving thing because we are afraid. How often do we look back on an encounter when we hesitated for fear of rejection or ridicule and see that an opportunity to show love was lost?

True love is fearless. We do not fear God’s judgment and we do not fear rejection of others if we are full of love. Love overcomes fear. The answer to fear in relationships is love.

As we contemplate this, we realize that we will always have some fear in our relationships in this life. We see here another one of John’s absolute statements: *there is no fear in love*. We should not expect to be *perfect* in this life, but that’s no reason to lower the standard. We are to move closer to that goal all the time (Matthew 5:48). Heaven will be a place of perfection, and that certainly means, among other things, there will be no more fear.

E. Love (v. 19)

19. We love because he first loved us.

John ends this section with a marvelously succinct summary.

Love has a source for us. That source is God. We ourselves seem to be programmed for selfishness. True love begins with God. Our understanding of what love is depends on our understanding of God. When we understand the fact that God loved us so much that he gave his Son to save us, then we begin to fathom the true nature of love. Knowing God means knowing love. Loving God means loving others.

Conclusion

A. Hard Love

Some people are hard to love. A woman in a church where I ministered (I'll call her Diane) was consistently mean to my family and me. I do not know why. She said unnecessarily critical things about my wife. She spread rumors about me that were not true. She never had a good word to say about my sermons, only condescending complaints.

Whenever I offered a kindness to her, Diane responded with suspicion. Any soft words said to her were rejected. She was hard to love. I wish I could say that eventually I wore down Diane with my love and we became friends, but that never happened. Yet I can say that I never returned her meanness with meanness of my own. While I tired of her behavior, I did not fear or hate her.

I think that God must feel that way toward us sometimes. We are hard to love. We are selfish. We are unfaithful. We act out of fear. Yet he still loves us. His love is never failing, perfect, and inexhaustible. May we not resist God's love, and instead, may we follow his example.

B. Prayer

Holy God, you are ever loving, but at times we are the opposite. We are selfish, bitter, jealous, petty. We are many things that would never be called "love." Teach us to be like you in loving others. Help us love even those friends and family who are very difficult to love. Make us more like you, the source and the goal of all our love. We pray this in the name of the greatest expression of your love, your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Let God's love for you be an endless source of your love for others.

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