

1st JOHN BIBLE STUDY

1 John 4:15-21

Lesson #17

Introduction

1st John Bible study, lesson 17, covering chapter 4, verses 15-21. Starting last week in verse 7, John turned his attention onto the subject of love. We discussed love as it's defined in the scriptures, and pointed out the stark difference between godly love and worldly love. And we said that the distinguishing characteristics of godly love is that it focus on the eternal good of those who we love. It sacrifices itself for the good of others, and always calls for repentance of sin and obedience God for the long range benefit. On the other hand, worldly love demonstrates itself by refraining from judgements, and encouraging disobedience to God and His commandments, for the sake of immediate pleasures. This is what the world calls love. But it ends up in damning judgement and destruction for all those who practice it. In this lesson we'll continue with the characteristics of godly love as the Apostle John describes in these verses. The title is:

Confidence on the Day of Judgement

15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 16 We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. 17 By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. 19 We love, because He first loved us. 20 If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

1 John 4:15-21 (NASB)

Verse 15:

15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.

Here we have a simple statement that declares that there is another visible product (fruit, response) from those in whom God abides. John has already told us repeatedly that they will respond by willingly obeying His commandments, and now he adds another fruit, that of confessing that Jesus is the Son of God. But really these two are tied directly together, because that belief is the very substance of saving faith, and the results of that faith is the responses of obedience and belief in the divine nature of Jesus Christ as the beloved Son of God. No one can be indwelt by the Spirit of God and at the same time deny, or even doubt, that Jesus is the Son of God who came into the world as the Savior of mankind.

God does not recognize any profession of belief that skirts (avoids) His Son. Believing that there is a god of some kind is a no brainer. Anyone with half a brain cannot possibly look at the totality of creation, and the incredible interaction and balances of forces, and honestly conclude that it all happened without a designer. But just any god is no god at all, to the true and living God. And He acknowledges no profession of belief in Himself, unless it includes His testimony regarding His only beloved Son, Jesus Christ. And His Spirit abiding in a regenerate (born again) human absolutely guarantees that this person will confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and all those things that are essential to that stature.

We have countless numbers of religions, and they have countless numbers of gods whom they endorse, but none of them are the true and living God of the Bible, they are gods manufactured in their own carnal minds, and inspired by the flesh (meaning fallen human intellect and superstitions) and by Satanic influences, to confuse and corrupt mankind's knowledge of the true God. And, because mankind's nature is contrary to God's nature, mankind has created countless counterfeit idols that will accommodate their needs. Some are tolerant and forgiving of everything, and some are harsh and demanding, but all are false idols that can save no one from their sins when they stand before that great white throne of judgement and answer to the true, righteous, and holy, God of creation. But as John is about to make clear, that will never happen to those who rightly know and believe in Jesus Christ. A sure and certain knowledge of the truth affords a wonderful comfort and confidence to those who know and believe in the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Verses 16-19:

16 We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. 17 By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. 19 We love, because He first loved us.

Now in verse 16, John essentially repeats what he just said in verse 15, but he adds love to the equation. Along with a confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, comes a love that was heretofore impossible. The natural emotion of mankind is to fear God, because they know that He is holy and perfect, and has unattainable requirements of sinless righteousness, which they can't meet, and don't want to have to. So, they fear God, and usually hate having to think about Him too seriously, because doing so evokes inescapable thoughts of punishment. Love for God is the farthest thing from their mind's, at best they hope maybe He might love them, and overlook their sins, if they weren't too horrific. There's no capacity to love a God that is so very different from themselves, who hates and forbids everything they love the most. And then commands them to behave in a manner that they can't stand.

How can anyone who is not regenerated, born again of a new Spirit, possibly love the true and living God. The answer; they can't, and they don't. So John uses this divine attribute of love as a **proof of life**. Proof of God's life abiding within every true believer. Now we've already said, in previous lessons, that there are numerous people who really love the god they've invented in their minds, and some will even die for these false gods, but it's not possible to love the true God of the Bible, in all His holiness, righteousness, and divine sovereignty, without something breaking the fear of His divine judgement. And the confession of Jesus Christ as God's Son, who was sent into the world to be the complete propitiation for all sins for God's chosen, is the means to break this lock of fear, and open the door to receive His love for us, and allow us to really love Him. And for good reason.

This is what John is referring to in verse 17 when he says that we have confidence in/on the day of judgement. His love for us, and our true love for Him, has done its perfecting (effectual) work within us, by way of replacing a paralyzing fear of wrath, with a confidence of His mercy and forgiveness, and not based on our own merits or works, but on those of His beloved Son Jesus Christ, whom we openly, and proudly, profess as our Lord and Savior. From this position of confident forgiveness, a true love of God is not only possible, it's inevitable, and inescapable.

This verse goes on to say *because as He is, so also are we in this world*. To rightly understand this statement we have to keep it in its immediate context, which is that of love being the reassuring agent of confidence on the day of judgement. We are the objects of God's love in the same way that Jesus is the object of God's love; in that regard, we are as He is. When we understand and believe this, then love has done its perfecting work in our heart's and mind's, and we have confidence that we are not going to see punishment, but loving mercy on the day of judgement. John says that it is this confidence that is the product of a perfected love of God. And a perfected love also includes our loving our brothers and our willing obedience to His commandments, as John has already established repeatedly. When we desire to obey, and we love our brothers and sisters, we gain a confidence of the authenticity of our love for God and His love for us. And John is saying that this is exactly how it should be when love is genuine.

The more we become like Christ, the greater is our confidence that He abides in us and we abide in Him, and the more deeply and surely we affirm our love for Him and His love for us. A growing Christlikeness within us, demonstrated both inwardly and outwardly, instills confidence. His Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. (Rom 8:16) The next verse continues this thought:

Verse 18:

18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.

It's easy to misinterpret John's point in this verse unless it's kept in its context of this whole group of verses. *There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear* is absolutely true in as much as it assures us that our fate will be determined by a loving Father who has provided all that's necessary for our total reconciliation and propitiation as we stand before Him.

What John isn't saying is that we're not to have a healthy and reverent fear of God. Paul writes in his second epistle to the Corinthians:

1 Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.
2 Cor 7:1 (NASB)

What John is talking about is not our overall perception of God, but our expectation of His response toward us at our coming before Him. Love casts out our fear of being in a position of wrath and judgement, but it most certainly does not reduce our reverent fear of His sovereignty, His holiness, His righteousness, and His majesty. Moses shook with fear, Isaiah proclaimed that he was ruined and would surely die, Daniel fell to the ground paralyzed with fear, and the Apostle John fell down to the ground in fear, all at the presence of Christ in His glory. Love never reduces our perception of the glory of God, it perfects it, it fills it out, it gives it substance. But again, love changes everything concerning our perception of the final outcome of our lives, and the fear of possible wrath and punishment at the appearing of our Lord and Savior.

Any residual fear of God's wrath and punishment at His appearing is a sign that either our love is not genuine, or that we haven't yet matured in our understanding of the efficacy of the atonement of Jesus Christ. To hold residual fear of punishment is to manifest either a lack of understanding in the power of Christ's sinless life, His death on that cross, and His bodily resurrection, or, evidence of lingering unbelief in the truth of these vital tenets of the faith. John says that the work of faith is completed, that is perfected, when we have total confidence that Jesus Christ paid it all, to the last cent, and we are now seen by God the Father just as He sees His Son Jesus. We are seen as His beloved children, pure and unblemished, because we are clothed with the imputed righteousness of His beloved Son, and there can be no fear of wrath or punishment when so perceived. From this position there is only pure and abiding love for God, for all His mercy and kindness toward us. For us to love Him without fear, we must thoroughly understand all things about His Son, Jesus Christ, and our relationship in Him. And this brings us to the next verse:

Verse 19:

19 We love, because He first loved us.

It's a common concept that God will love us if we love Him first. But we've already discussed the dilemma that this involves. We are, by our fallen nature, so different from God in all our affections and all our values, and all our likes and dislikes, that any possibility of our loving Him is rendered unlikely, if not downright impossible. The fact is, that if God hadn't loved us from the beginning, none of us would ever love Him. The reason that we love, both our brothers and Him, is because He loved us first, and then did something about it. God knows all too well the great chasm of difference between us and Himself, and that we aren't able, or even desiring to cross that great chasm if left alone to ourselves. And to God, love didn't mean accepting those great differences, it meant resolving them, doing something about them.

God did not adopt a plan to allow multiplicity of opinions without conflicts, but rather a plan to resolve conflicts by eliminating multiplicity of opinions, at least on matters of righteousness and holiness. Truth is not relative, and there is not one truth for you and another for me, as is still popular today. God's love for us was demonstrated not just by the enormous sacrifice of his Son, but even further by His regeneration of our spirit with His Spirit, and our subsequent sanctification and transformation through the love of the truth. (1Pet 1:22) God's love toward us is demonstrated by His willingness to transform us to Christlikeness; to know the mind of Christ, and become like Him in our critical thinking and affections. Therefore, we love Him because He loved us first, and implemented the necessary measures whereby we could come to truly love Him in return. If you're sure that you know God, the true and real God of the Bible, and you love Him, then you can be certain that it's because He has loved you first, and chose you to know Him and be His own possession, forever. Praise the Lord.

Verse 20:

20 If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.

John continues to relentlessly press his points by stating the fact directly, and then immediately following it up with the converse in the negative. This leaves no place for debate or misinterpretation. When you finish reading 1st John you have only two choices, accept it or reject it, but you cannot argue that it isn't clear.

If we say that we love God, and then we hate our brother or sister, then we are a liar, and we don't love God at all. What part of that sentence don't we understand? You say this is impossible; well, tell that to John. Will we tell John that he's wrong, that he went a little overboard, and shouldn't have written this. I can't speak for you, but I'm sure not going to say this, or even think it. So, let's just deal with it.

Taken within its context, John is surely speaking of our general attitude and affection for the body of Christ, the saints. It is unnatural to harbor a hatred for the church, and the church is made up of individuals, and John makes it clear that the love of God that abides in us will extend itself to our brethren as well, because they are all His own people and our own family. We love our brethren, collectively and individually, because they belong to our Lord and Savior, and if our feelings toward them are hateful and repugnant then we can't possibly be indwelt by His Spirit, because these are mutually exclusive. John is speaking as a pastor, not as a lawyer, and he takes for granted that his listeners are fellow Christians who are seeking the truth, not lawyers looking for ways to cleverly skirt it.

Should you doubt your salvation if you generally love the church, and all the brethren, but you've had one or two church members that you just couldn't love? Probably not, but remember that Godly love seeks good for all men, if possible, and takes no pleasure in the harm of others. So don't let these things become a sin for you.

The real point is that for anyone to love an invisible, intangible, inaudible, God that they have never seen, nor ever can see, then they certainly will love those who are regenerated and transformed into His Son's likeness, and are tangible and present in our lives and churches right now. If we don't love those who are like Him, and with whom we have regular interaction, then how can we think we love the God who abides within them? To claim that we do is to lie. Many find church people unpleasant to be around, and don't want to associate with them because they're so different from ordinary folks, and if this is the case, then how can they love the God who made these people to be like they are? What makes Christians so annoying to the world is that they are so much like Jesus was when He was here. There were a few who found Him captivating, and left everything to follow Him, but most of the crowds just wanted to be healed of their afflictions and then leave Him and go back to their former lives. What He preached and taught wasn't the thing that drew them to Him, and as soon as they got what they really wanted, usually healings, they departed.

So many people attend Sunday morning church services to get their weekly, or monthly ration of religion, but as soon as it's over they quickly vacate the premises. Why do they do this? Because they don't like to be around real Christians. They're uncomfortable if the conversation turns to biblical issues, and seek to change the subject, because they don't know anything about the bible, nor do they wish to learn. What they don't understand, or maybe they do, is that those annoying Christians are like they are because the Spirit of Christ is resident within them, and their language and behavior is similar to that of Jesus. Why don't they understand that if that's annoying to them here and now, when we're only partially transformed, imagine how uncomfortable they would be if we were perfected.

If you have the Spirit of God abiding within, then you will love to be around these brothers and sisters, and you'll desire to keep the conversation on biblical things. This is the love of God being perfected within the true believers, and if it's absent then the abiding Spirit of God is also absent. According to John, our suspicions are correct when we wonder about those masses of church members who show no desire whatsoever for biblical things, and always shift the conversations off the bible and back onto the world. All of their close friends are secular, not Christians, because they are too uncomfortable around Christians, real ones that is. John says they are lying about their love for God, because they don't love us or the things that we love. They still love the world, because they are still of the world.

In fact, we Christians are fully intended to be a visible demonstration to the whole world of just what God is like. What we do and say is intended to be His visible display of Himself to humanity. He is invisible, He is a purely Spirit entity, He has no tangible substance. For the purpose of visible display, His Son Jesus is the express image of His likeness in visible form. (Col 1:15) If you've seen Jesus, then you've seen all that's possible to see of God the Father. (Jn 14:9) But, since Jesus isn't here in bodily form right now, He has designated us, His redeemed, to be His visible presence on earth, and to live and proclaim all that He is to mankind. (Mat 5:13-16) By this He is glorified, even though He isn't currently visible.

If you love those who are indwelt by God, and appreciate and desire the same things they do, then you will love God also, because we are, on this earth, as He is, in His nature and character. (v.17) If you don't love the children who are acting in unison with their parent, then how can you think you will love the parent. John says that you won't, and you're lying if you say that you do. A love for God is a love for His church, because there is no difference between the two in character and nature. Multitudes claim to love God, at least some kind of god, but then they turn right around and say they can't stand going to church, which demonstrates that they're lying about their love for God, at least the true and living God of the Bible. What Christ is to God the Father, His visible representation, we are to Christ right now, by our visible behavior.

If you think you can love Jesus, and at the same time despise, or dislike the brothers and sisters for their strange behavior and beliefs, then you are very much mistaken. We Christians are like we are because of our association with our Lord. It is our being as He is, in this world, (v.17) that makes us different, and you either love that difference or you don't. When real Christians get together they have no greater pleasure than digging into the scriptures and talking about Jesus, and learning everything they can about Him and the things He taught.

When caught in such a position, False converts go through a progression of feelings. First they're just uncomfortable, because they're out of their element, as it goes on they become frustrated and start looking for an excuse to escape. If prolonged they grow angry and disgusted, and their lack of love for these brothers and sisters boils over to the breaking point. If you've been a church member for very long, you know exactly what we're talking about. The only question you might still have is whether or not these people are true Christians, and John is saying emphatically, in these verses, that they are not. This behavior is not characteristic of the abiding love of God working within the heart's and mind's of a regenerate child of God. Love for the brethren is an inescapable product of being indwelt by the Spirit of God, and the absence of it, is both obvious and conclusive. You do not find it annoying, or unpleasant, to speak about and learn about the One whom you claim to love. Now, the last verse:

Verse 21:

21 And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

John now puts this principle into command form. We all know full well that we can't be commanded to emotionally and mentally love anybody, we either do or we don't, but John is speaking now on the functional level. We are commanded to demonstrate that abiding love of God, that has been placed within us by His Spirit, by our actions toward our brothers and sisters. We just discussed that as Christians, we are the current day body of Jesus Christ, a Temple for the display of the glory of God during Christ's present absence, and as such, our behaviors are the reflection of His attributes to the whole world. When Jesus was here on the earth, He was the visible manifestation of the glory of the Father, but now, we have been delegated that task, and when we are keenly aware of that, our actions are of the greatest concern. Thus we are commanded to do justice to the glory of our God, and our Savior, by our demonstration of love towards our brothers, and the whole world for that matter.

Certainly this is a proper command, but the truth is, it shouldn't have to be a command, it should be the utmost desire in the heart's of every born again believer in the Lord, Jesus Christ. Paul wrote this, he said:

7 For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; 8 for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's Romans 14:7-8 (NASB)

And, as His own possession, we have been designated, been set apart, and sanctified to be His visible representatives on this earth until His glorious return, and we should need no command to understand and earnestly seek to do all things to His glory, and seeing as one of His greatest attributes is that of love, we are commanded to demonstrate that love visibly, from the heart, in our everyday dealings, especially with our own brethren.

Conclusion:

Now, I want to conclude this lesson with a very brief review of this chapter, because we'll be moving into chapter 5, the final chapter of this epistle, in our next lesson.

This chapter begins with the admonition not to believe every spirit, every so called prophet, because there are many of them in this world, and they're not all from God. Being a Christian involves faith to be sure, but it never means being naive. John describes several things that distinguish the true believer from the imposters. He says that the true believers will be discerning, and they will be able and desiring to recognize the truth, particularly concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. On this issue there is no room for diverse opinions. Those who adamantly, or just lazily accept heresy, and every wind of doctrine, are said to be absent of the Spirit of God, and by this the true may be distinguished from the false. (v.6)

Starting in verse 7, and continuing through the end of chapter 4, John speaks of love, and uses God's sacrificing of His only begotten Son to suffer and die for the sins of others as the example of how it's rightly defined. Love is, at its core, a willingness to suffer and sacrifice anything and everything for the good of those we love. God so loves the world of fallen sinners that He's chosen for His own children, that He will surrender the life and dignity, temporarily, of His most beloved Son, for the sake of saving His chosen family from destruction, even when they clearly deserve it. When we speak of godly love, we have an example to use for comparison. Godly love evokes obedience, and not just forced obedience but willing obedience, joyful obedience, from the heart, and with full agreement and accord.

And this kind of love, abiding within our hearts, is one of the most certain and convincing evidences to us that we abide in Him and He abides in us. We discussed that godly love seeks the benefit of others, by calling them to repentance and obedience to God, whereas worldly love encourages disobedience to God for the sake of temporary pleasures of the flesh, that will lead to inescapable judgement and destruction. When we love with godly love, self-sacrificing, and obedient love, not the love that the world demonstrates, then we have confidence that our faith is truly from God. There is no kind of godly faith that is absent of this kind of love, because God *is* this kind of love, and all who are indwelt with His Spirit, are indwelt with this kind of love, and both feel it, and joyfully demonstrate it toward God and all His children.

Saints, we do not serve a narrow little God, we serve a magnificent God, whose character and nature span the whole gamut of characteristics and emotions that we humans know, and probably well beyond. Some see God as a frightful overlord, looking to crush any who oppose His will, and others see Him as a sweet old man in a rocking chair who would never really impose judgement on anybody. But the Bible describes Him as a much more complex Being than we usually envision.

For instance, He is the God that flooded the whole planet with enough water that it killed every man, woman, and infant baby on planet earth at that time because of their gross violence and immorality and idolatry, with the exception of (8) persons, whom He chose to save. And He is also the God that spared the idolatrous and sinful city of Nineveh, when they repented at Jonah's preaching. He is the God that commanded Saul to go and kill every human being of the Amalekites, including men, women, children and infants, including even the cattle and animals. (1Sam 15:1-3) And He is the God that sent His only beloved Son into the world to suffer humiliation, pain, and death in the place of guilty sinners, so they would be saved from destruction.

It is a grave mistake to perceive the true and living God in a narrow and simple perspective. He is immensely complex, and He takes actions that visibly demonstrate His broad range of characteristics for the purpose of displaying the full scope of His power and glory. It can either be a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God, (Heb 10:31) or it can be the sweetest of pleasures. Paul wrote, concerning the temporary condition of the Jews at that time: *22 Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.* (Rom 11:22)

We serve, and belong entirely to, a very complex God. He is completely sovereign and knows it without a doubt, even though we seem to somehow miss that point. He does entirely as He pleases, with whatever and whomever He desires, and this apparently seems to surprise us, or even shock us. Our perception of God has become dull and distant in the many years of His seeming absence of supernatural activity. But it's only when we recognize the full range of His authority and His power, and His already demonstrated willingness to exercise that authority and power, that we are then able to understand the value of His loving mercy toward us, thoroughly undeserving sinners.

When we see what He is willing and capable of doing, from past experiences recorded in scriptures, then we can begin to see the immense value of His choosing us as His own children, and setting His everlasting love upon us, and sacrificing His most valuable possession on our behalf. With this in mind, only then can we begin to rightly understand John's comforting words that true love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and our punishment has been borne already, in its entirety, by the loving mercy of a supremely powerful and sovereign God, who loves us, and has forgiven our every sin and transgression.

I say now with the greatest of sadness, that many will be those who eventually come to know, first hand, the terror of falling into the hands of the living God. They will finally see the truth about those who claimed to love them, and yet encouraged them to knowingly sin against God, because a loving God wouldn't really judge them for their actions. They will see the error of such a profession of love when the consequences of that kind of love fall squarely upon their heads, and they stare into an eternal lake of fiery hell, from which no escape is possible, ever. Only then will they shout to their former encouragers "how can you call this loving?"

But alas, it's too late to make a correction at that point, and all their worst fears and nightmares will have become a stark, and terrifying reality. They knew this might happen, but they gambled that God wasn't real, and the threats of a burning hell were just a myth; but now here it is, staring them right in the face, and there's no more denying it. There's no more deferring actions until tomorrow. It's real and it's here, now. Their mind's will race furiously with ways to escape, and with excuses, and confessions, weeping, and pleading, and begging for another chance; but all of that will fall on deaf ears, for there will be no sympathy and no mercy now for those who willfully spent their whole lives in flagrant disobedience to the holy, magnificent, and sovereign living God, who gave us more than ample warnings.

God is calling all men, everywhere, to repent of their sins and believe in His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, and those who refuse will not escape the consequences. They will never know the unfathomable depths of the love of God, but rather His everlasting wrath will reside upon them. This is what they chose, so this is what they'll have. To these, God will be a consuming fire, for all eternity. (Heb 12:29)

But, as for us, His beloved children, who repent of our sins, obey His commands, and openly confess Jesus Christ as the divine and perfect Son of God, who died for us, to redeem us from our sins, we continually thank God, and worship Him, for His loving mercy toward us. To all of us, **God is love**, and this is how we will know Him, and how He will know us, for all eternity beloved. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Narrow Gate Baptist Church, Miami
Robert Andrews, Pastor
08/16/11