

I. Intro

A. Several years before his death the prominent Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, came to the United States to deliver a series of lectures. After one of his talks a graduate student asked, “Dr. Barth, what is the greatest thought that has ever crossed your mind?”

B. After thinking for several moments Barth famously replied, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”¹

C. This statement was shocking because Barth – who was quite famous (he’d been on the cover of Time) – was famous for being very deep. His writing was dense and seemingly limitless. One of the jokes about him is that no one had read everything he had written, including him. And yet he had answered this important and interesting question using the lyrics of a children’s song.

D. In doing so, I think he hit just the right note. Christianity is not simply a moral philosophy or a set of ethical guidelines. It is a comprehensive worldview based on the bold proclamation: “Jesus loves me.” The claim that Christians celebrate is not simply that God is infinite, perfect, self-existent, holy, glorious and eternal – because he could be all of these things and still be an abstract force devoid of feelings. What the Bible declares is that God is a personal being who loves that which he made.

E. And we are to be shaped by God’s love. Buoyed. Empowered. Stunned. Redirected. And, Advent is a great time to be reminded of that.

F. And my first thought this morning was – somehow, I need to help people feel loved. I need to help those who are in Christ operate from the safety and glory and goodness of that position that Barth announced: Jesus loves me.

1. This needs to be their key thought. Not the report they have to get done. Their anxiety about seeing whoever over Christmas. Not the war in Ukraine or whatever.

G. Because it changes everything. And 1 John 4 is the right passage, because God is love. But, this is hard to do, because:

1. we are so deeply religious (we want to earn). Salvation by grace alone is hard to believe.

2. And also because there is a lot of crazy thinking about love. The term is pretty shop worn. What does it mean? We use it to talk about our deep connection and commitment to our spouses or children. And also to talk about our desire to have mushrooms on our pizza.

II. This is the final week of Advent

A. The four weeks set aside to prepare for the celebration of Christ’s birth and to look ahead to his promised return. To be mindful of the fact that history is headed somewhere. It is not random or cyclical. It had a beginning – when God spoke things into existence. And it

will have a culmination – where every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

B. Three weeks ago, as part of our preparation we lit the candle of Hope. Two weeks ago, it was the candle of peace. Last week it was the candle of Joy. On Saturday – at our Christmas eve services – we will light the Christ candle. Today we light the candle of Love.

III. Our focus today is love. There is not a designated text. - which means there are many places we might turn.

A. I am thinking now only of the Bible. Of course, there are millions of books and poems and songs and movies about love. There are scientific studies and works of art about love. And then there is the internet. I Googled love and got 16.2 billion hits.

B. We are focusing on the Bible. Although that still leaves things pretty wide open.

C. There is a sense in which this entire book is about love.

1. That is not all it is about. And it is not love in some generic or sentimental sense. It is God's love on display through the incarnation and crucifixion.

2. One of the questions I used to ask college students is, "what is the main message of the Bible?" And if they said, "love." I knew they had not read it. So, love is not a perfect answer, but it's not far off.

D. It is worth noting that love is one of the main attributes of God, consequently it is one of the big themes in any systematic theology book.

E. And, there are entire books in the Bible that are primarily about love.

1. The book of Ruth is – in some ways – a study of love. The book of Jonah has much to say about God's love. The Song of Solomon uses erotic love as a backdrop to reflect on God's love.

F. Stepping further down the grid – from the Bible to a major theme in the Bible, to book of the Bible, we could think about the chapters of various books that are all about love:

1. John 15 – is one. This is the Vine and branches passage, where Jesus says: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.

2. In I Corinthians 13, Paul describes love.

3. I John 4 is referred to as the "love chapter."

G. Within chapters we have stories – parables about love. The Parable of the Good Samaritan and the Parable of the Prodigal Son are two examples.

H. Within chapters we also have laws about love.

1. The Ten Commandments starts by talking about our need to order our loves – and that means starting by loving God.

2. When asked to summarize the Ten Commandments, Jesus said: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

I. And going down a bit smaller we have verses that are about love.

1. John 3:16 – For God so loved the world that he gave

2. I John 4:8 - Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

J. And we could go one step smaller and look at the specific words used for love. Where we have one word for love, the Greeks had four.

1. *Phileo* was used to describe the loyalty and virtuous love found between friends and family. It is the root in Philadelphia (the city of brotherly love) and also philanthropy.

2. *Storge* is the natural affection parents have for their children. It is often translated by our term fondness.

3. *Eros* describes passion and sensual desire. It is the root of the English term erotic.²

K. With the benefit of these three terms the ancients were able to differentiate between types or aspects of love better than we are. They do not end up saying, “I love God. I love my spouse and I love mushrooms on my pizza.”

L. But interestingly, the three words were not enough. Both those charged with translating the Hebrew Bible into Greek,³ and the writers of the New Testament themselves, did not think *phileo*, *storge* or *eros* were strong enough to represent the kind of love God has for us. They selected a seldom-used term and infused it with the meaning they wanted to convey. It is this term – *agape* – which implies a self-sacrificing, giving love, that they used almost exclusively when writing about God’s love for us.⁴

M. And you can see why. We may say we love chocolate cake, but we should have a different word for that than our love for our family or God. I mean, we do not really love chocolate cake. We do not care about the well being of the cake. We want to eat it. The word we need there is probably something more along the lines of desire.

IV. But, I digress. The point is, love is such a big theme that we could intersect with it at so many different levels within the Bible. Today I want to sit with the implications of 1 John 4:8. This is the statement that God is love, and it seems to me that it’s the kind of statement you have to sit with and meditate on. It has a lot of layers.

V. Let me read I John 4:7-12

A. Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 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. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.⁵

B. There is much here to consider:

1. John's explanation that love does not look like our commitment to God – which is weak and flawed, but looks like God's love for us.
2. Or the fact that this love is demonstrated or understood not by a warm feeling, but by the sacrificing death: 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.

C. But I want to focus on the assertion that God is love.

1. I have noted before that one of the ways the Greeks and Hebrews emphasized a point was by repeating it. A second way they would do this was what we see here. By equating one thing with another. By stating that God is love John is declaring that love is so much a part of his character that to express the depths of his love we must say God is love.⁶
2. Saying that “God is Love” does not mean that “Love is God.” Some have argued that if $A = B$ then $B = A$. But what works in math does not always work in literature. Case in point: we also say, “Love is blind” but no one would suggest that “blindness is love.” To imply that all love is God would not only be an act of idolatry, it would reduce God down to just one of his attributes.⁷ And while this is tempting – after all, if we could reduce God to love we would never need to fear his holiness, justice or judgment – this is not what the text means.
3. It also does not mean that God is particularly sentimental. Those who equate love with butterflies in the stomach, candle-lit dinners and baskets full of puppies – that is, with a warm emotion – are missing key parts of love.
4. I do not want to cast aside the butterflies or the baskets full of puppies. God's love has a heart-felt component to it. Last week I referenced Zephaniah 3, where we are told that God sings over us. It creates an image of a parent (or grandparent) singing over an infant.
5. But God's love is more than a feeling and it is never fickle. The Bible declares that God's love is steadfast. It is always stable, never swayed. The psalmist declares, “The steadfast love of God endures forever.”⁸

VI. So, what does “God is love” actually mean?

- A. It means that his love is so profound that it is hard to overstate.
- B. It means that God’s love for us is subject generated not object elicited.
1. The passage emphasizes that God is love not that we are lovable.
 2. This is the point I try to make in a wedding. I note that the vows they take are such that what they are signing up for is to be committed to the best for the other. They are not saying, “I will love you because you are lovable.” But even when you are not.
- C. Men and women, this is not only a really big point to make at a wedding. It is a really big point to make for life. It means, God loves us in spite of who we are, not because of who we are. He is the hero of the story, which means we are free to move from a platform of love not fear.
1. If you are in Christ – your sins are forgiven. God knows the worst about us and loves us anyway.
 2. The Bible is not naïve about the human condition. Read it. Everyone but Jesus is broken.
 3. Indeed, it describes us as God’s enemy. In fact, in the fifth chapter of his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul writes: **... at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**
 - a) What this means is that, while our Heavenly Father could expect nothing from us but active rebellion and hatred, he sent his Son to secure our rescue. In other words, God loves us in spite of who we are, not because of who we are.
 4. Pause for a second to consider the great irony on display here:
 - a) Though God is all-together perfect, gracious, holy and awesome – i.e., though he is perfectly lovable – we do not love him.
 - b) Meanwhile, even though we are quite unlovable – he does love us.⁹
- D. There are many other points about God’s love to be made – and that are made in other places in the Bible. Your mood should be changed by the fact that His love is inexhaustible.
1. This past week a group of scientists in got fusion to work – rekindling the idea that one day we will have energy that is clean and cheap and nearly limitless. Well,

fusion has nothing on God. God's love is unending. Limitless. It is not just perfect, it is infinite.

2. Paul celebrates this point in his letter to the Ephesians, where he prays that they will grasp "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" which surpasses knowledge.¹⁰

3. And also in his letter to the Romans, where he writes: For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

4. God's love is greater than we can comprehend. It is perfect. The Father's gift of his Son was the greatest gift he could give – for Christ is the best he has to offer. And in offering Christ he offered himself. What more could he give? Our loving God has grace for the guilty, mercy for the miserable and kindness for the helpless. He is good. He is patient. He is generous and compassionate.¹¹ Indeed, he is not simply loving. He is love.

VII. So, what does this mean? Where does this leave us as we are rounding the corner and headed towards Christmas?

A. Well, it means we should love God. He is perfect and beautiful and good and He has withheld no good thing from us – not even his son. To not love him is to be profoundly misshaped. Malformed. Broken. There is something off.

B. And we should obey him by loving one another. We are called to that. This is the gist of the I John 4 passage. Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.¹²

VIII. But let me suggest, we reflect on God's love for us and allow ourselves to be shaped by God and his love for me. Which is hard to do. For most of us, we are rehearsing well trafficked truths right now. Ideas that though shocking, can fail to shock. They are shop worn. They are cliches.

A. Take John 15:13 – a statement that describes love, saying "there is no greater love than that you would give up your life for another." There is a sense in which this is the Easter story not Christmas, but they are connected. And the incarnation was a staggering event.

B. That led me to think about Jim Elliot and the group that went to Papua New Guinea in 1956 and were killed trying to bring the Gospel to the Aucas – a small indigenous tribe.

C. As you may know, Peter and Olive Flemming were one of the five young couples. He was among those killed. Four years later, Olive would remarry. Her new husband was Walt Liefeld, who served as the senior pastor here between 91 and 96.

D. In addition to a big Life magazine spread, several books were written about this. Elizabeth Elliot – one of the widows – wrote the most popular. It's titled, *Through Gates of Splendor*. Olive's is called *Unfolding Destinies*.

E. Later Steve Saint, the son of Nate Saint – one of the men killed - return and lead the Aucas the faith. Steve Saint later produced the movie, *The End of the Spear* – in which the Liefelds have a cameo appearance.

F. All of that to say, a number of the widows and children of the men killed, returned to Equator to keep reaching out to the Acaua Indians. Sometimes those kind of illustrations help us think more clearly about the sacrificial nature of God's love – and the love we are called to have for God and others.

G. Which is the ultimate love story – and the Christmas story: for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, p. 330.

² Though the biblical writers spoke approvingly of sexual love, erotic love was so debased during biblical times that the New Testament writers never used this term in the New Testament.

³ During the 400 years between the end of the period covered in the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament era, Greek culture spread throughout the Middle East. As a result, many Jews only spoke Greek. To that end the Old Testament – which had been written in Hebrew – was translated into Greek. This happened well before Christ was born. The Greek translation of the Old Testament is frequently referred to as the Septuagint. In writing it is also referenced as LXX.

⁴ Agape is the word for *love* most frequently used in the New Testament. It is employed in Matthew 22:39 where Christ instructs us to love (agape) our neighbor as our self, in John 15:12, where he gives us the commandment, "to love (agape) one another as I have loved you" and in 1 John 4:8, "God is love (agape). It is also the word highlighted in I Corinthians 13. However, the word "agape" is not always used in a lofty or spiritual sense. In 2 Timothy 4:10 Paul writes, "For Demas has forsaken me, having loved (*agapo*) this present world...." And it is not fair to draw too much of a distinction between *phileo* and *agape*. In the Old Testament, the main verb for love is "*achav*", which has a somewhat wider range of uses: from basic human loves and yearnings, such as a father's love for his son (Genesis 22:2), a strong bond among friends (1 Samuel 10:17), and also for God's love of his people (Exodus 20:6) and humanity's love of God (Psalm 5:11).

⁵ The passage is I John 4:7-11. Note: this same point had already been made in the Old Testament. Following the first giving of the law to Moses at Mount Sinai (Ex. 20–31), the Israelites' rebelled. In Exodus chapters 32-33 the people are punished for this disobedience. In Exodus 34 a renewal of the covenant takes place in which God reaffirms a central tenet of his character to the people. There we read: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." (Ex. 34:6-7a). This text, which became a central confessional statement for ancient Israel, demonstrates that God's love is at the core of his character. Or to put it differently, from a biblical perspective God *defines* love.

⁶ Writing on this point RC Sproul says: "To know God is to know Him in His love. This is not an abstract concept of philosophers. God is no naked thought. He is the Lover of my soul and the One who to know is to love and to learn how to love." (Sproul, p. 162.)

⁷ In his book, *One Holy Passion*, RC Sproul writes,

⁸ Psalm 52:1, 8. Note: In this text the Hebrew noun underlying the English words “steadfast love” is “*besed*”. This important term does not merely mean “love”, but specifically denotes the idea of “committed love, steadfast love or faithful love” – the kind of love that is at the heart of God’s nature.

⁹ Sproul, page. 162f. To state this slightly differently, indeed, though it has been said that the “greatest” display of love we can show is dying for a friend, Christ actually took things one step further – he laid down his life for his enemies.

¹⁰ Eph. 3:17bff.

¹¹ Dr. Curt Daniel, *Basic Christian Doctrine*, Outline 14, page 2.

¹² I John 4:7f.