

## “Confidence for the Day of Judgment”

### The Ninth in a Series of Sermons on John’s Epistles

*Texts: 1 John 4:7-21; Leviticus 19:9-18*

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I think it safe to say that most people would identify “love one another” as the primary ethical teaching of Christianity. No doubt, the love of neighbor is an apt summary of those things required by the second table of the law (commandments 5-10). Jesus even spoke this way in Matthew 22 when he summarizes the law. But whenever the Bible directs us to love our neighbor, we must never forget that the context for this commandment is always God’s *prior* love for us. As the Apostle John puts it in verse 10, of the fourth chapter of his first epistle, “*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*” It is because of God’s prior love for us—a love which moved God to send his son to suffer and die to take away the guilt of our sins—that we, in turn, are to love our neighbors. The indicative—the gospel, i.e., what God does for us in Christ—must be properly related to the imperative—the necessity of obeying God’s commands. Understanding this distinction is vital if we are to make full sense of 1 John and the Apostle’s stress upon the necessity of obeying the commandments of God, specifically the command to love others as we would ourselves.

We continue our series on the Epistles of John. As we have seen throughout this series, understanding the specific historical circumstances which prompted John to write these epistles is essential if we are to understand why John addresses the particular topics in the way that he does. These three epistles of John most likely were written late in the first century to Christians throughout Asia Minor (in and near the city of Ephesus), where John was an elderly man and the last living apostle.

Having composed his gospel (likely a year or so earlier), John must now respond to a group of false teachers who had departed from the faith, having supposedly gained insight into the secret teachings of Jesus. Having imbibed from what John calls the spirit of antichrist (a form of proto-Gnosticism), these individuals were denying that Jesus was God manifest in the flesh. While affirming that Jesus is truly God, the false teachers also affirmed that Jesus merely took the form of a human—explaining his physical appearance as recounted in the gospels. This fully divine but not truly human Jesus, flies directly in the face of everything John had taught in his gospel, which depicts Jesus as the eternal word manifest in the flesh. The denial of Jesus’ human nature poses a great threat to the church, which explains why John opens this epistle with the declaration that he himself had seen Jesus in the flesh, that he had heard Jesus preach, and that he had even seen Jesus perform miracles. Jesus was no docetic phantom without flesh, blood, and bones. Jesus is God manifest in the flesh. As we have seen, to deny Christ’s true human nature is to deny Christianity. It is to embrace the spirit of antichrist.

Closely connected to the false teaching which denies Jesus’ true human nature (the heresy of docetism), is an indifference to the commandments of God. In the opening chapter, John has warned us about claiming to be without sin. Given John’s stress upon the necessity of Christians striving to obey the commandments of God, it is reasonable to assume that those who embraced the docetic Jesus believed that they had mastered the power of sin, and were claiming that they had actually reached the point where they ceased from sinning. Because of this self-deception, these people saw no need of obeying the commandments. John describes this as “the practice of sin,” which ultimately produces the kind of worldliness we see in a figure like Cain—who murdered his brother because he was jealous that Abel brought an acceptable sacrifice to God when his produce offering was not accepted.

It is because of this denial of our Lord's true human nature and the errors that were connected to it, that John stresses the importance of Christ's incarnation—Jesus is truly God and fully human. Those whom Jesus has brought from death to life (and who are now born again), those for whom Jesus has died as a propitiation, those for whom Jesus presently intercedes in heaven before the Father, as well as those upon whom he has poured out the blessed Holy Spirit, will inevitably struggle with sin and they will seek to obey God's law. Therefore, those who are truly Christ's will not "practice" sin, in the sense of remaining indifferent to it. From the opening words of this epistle, John has been arguing that what we believe about Jesus must impact how we live our lives.

In order to contrast the truth with the error with which he is dealing, John makes his case in chapter two that Christians must strive to obey God's commandments, they must love their brothers and sisters in Christ, they must avoid worldliness (thinking and acting like a non-Christian) and be fully aware that many antichrists are already present in the world—an antichrist being anyone who denies that Jesus is God in the flesh. In chapters three and four John repeats these same themes, each time adding new points of emphasis. In the opening verses of chapter four, John reminds us that we need to be ever-vigilant in regard to false teaching and false teachers who—because they speak the world's language—will always be able to gain a hearing, but who will deny the truth that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh, a doctrine which the apostles have all taught with one voice from the very beginning. John's words remind us that it is not a question of "if" false teachers will come, but rather it is only a matter of "when."

Two times earlier in this epistle, John has spoken of the necessity of Christian love—that is, how we regard our brothers and sisters in Christ. In verse 23 of chapter 3 (which echo the words of John 13:34), John stated "*this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.*" In chapter 4:7-21, John will again take up the necessity of loving one another. It was William Tyndale who said of this section of John, "John singeth his old song again."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, he does. Although repeating the same basic point, John changes the emphasis significantly, this time focusing upon how Christian love flows out of God's love. But John immediately moves on from considering God's love in the abstract, to considering God's love as it is manifest in history—Christ's work on the cross in offering himself as a propitiation for our sins.

So, with that bit of context in mind, we turn to our text, 1 John 4:7-21.

**S** Growing directly out of the point John has labored so hard to establish—if we believe that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh, then we will strive to obey God's commands—in verse 7, John returns to our Lord's well-known commandment that believers must love one another—a commandment also found in the law and its various stipulations as spelled out in Leviticus 19:9-18 (our Old Testament lesson). "*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.*" There are a couple of important things of which we need to take note as we proceed.

The first is this is the first of three times in this section alone when John speaks of the necessity of Christians loving one another. If the amount of times something is repeated is a clue as to its importance, then this is a very important matter for John. As I pointed out a few sermons ago, we need to be careful not to read this as John Wesley would have us do—John is discussing sanctification and the need for a Christian to move on from a basic faith in Christ to a deeper, more profound Christian experience grounded in our ability to love our neighbor. John is not addressing the methods or means by which we

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Stott, The Letters of John, 162.

supposedly move to a level where we demonstrate greater obedience to the commandments. Rather, the apostle is making the point that the difference between those who believe that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh and those who don't, is rather obvious. Believers will strive to obey God's commands, and will therefore demonstrate, however imperfect, a genuine love for other Christians. Those who have embraced the docetic heresy and the phantom Jesus are not interested in such obedience to God's commands, nor will they demonstrate love for others. After all, they no longer sin, and they have gained insight into the mysteries of the universe, which renders John's discussion of Jesus and sin rather boring. This is same the insipid drivel we hear from new-agers and Buddhist wannabes today.

The second thing to keep in mind here is the reason why John restates this point so emphatically. All human love as its origin in God, who is love. If we are truly of God (which, as John has been arguing throughout this epistle means that God has called us to life through the gospel, that Christ has died for us, and that Jesus is even now presently interceding for us with our Father in heaven), then we will demonstrate that to be the case through our love for each other. Notice the way John frames this command. Let us love one another (an imperative). Why? Because love is from God (an indicative). Therefore, whoever loves has been born of God and knows God (also an indicative). The usual order of things (the indicative, followed by the imperative) is reversed, but the point still stands. We do not gain (or earn) God's love, if only we succeed in loving others. Rather, when we reflect upon the fact that God is love (that having been revealed to us in God's word), then we will in turn love others.

No doubt, this renewed discussion of the necessity of loving the brethren is framed by John with the opponents of the orthodox view of Jesus' humanity clearly in the apostle's mind. The false teachers may claim to truly know Christ, but they do not. The evidence which proves that they do not is that they don't love the brethren. In fact, their actions indicate that they are not only indifferent to the commandments of God (they think they are without sin), but in seeking to deceive others they demonstrate that they don't know the truth. What they are doing is bringing destruction to the body of Christ, and to God's people, by propagating their false teaching about Christ's human nature. To lead someone away from the true Christ to the spirit of antichrist, is about the most unloving thing a person can do.

John has stressed the importance of truth and discernment in verses 1-6. Here in verse 7, he ties truth to action. The truth is that God is love. And because God is love, those who know him, will seek to practice God's love. The error is that Jesus is not truly human. Those who hold this error deny that God is love (in that he sent his son to redeem us from our sins). When they teach this heresy and encourage others to embrace it (worldliness), they are demonstrating hatred for their brethren, as did Cain. This is why John can state in verse 8, *"Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."* Those who claim to know God (more specifically, the secret things revealed to an enlightened few) but don't love others, thereby prove that they don't know God. Those who know the truth (that God is love) will demonstrate that to be the case by loving others. All of this flows out of our knowledge of God. Again, for John, knowing the truth is the basis for action. Correct doctrine precedes ethics.

In verses 9-10, John makes the case that God's love is not some ethereal abstract principle (along the lines being argued by the proto-Gnostics). While there is ample evidence of God's love throughout redemptive history (especially seen in the call of Abraham and the formation of Israel, certainly in God's loving faithfulness to his covenant promises, even in the face of Israel's stubborn disobedience), the supreme illustration of the statement "God is love" is seen in the cross of Jesus Christ. John puts it this way. *"In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."* With this assertion, it is now becomes clear to John's reader

why those who deny that Jesus was truly human cannot truly affirm that God is love. Why is this? This is because God's love is manifest in a very particular way. The word was manifest in the flesh, not just to show us that God could come to earth in a body if he so wished. The word became flesh for a very specific reason—to save us from our sins. Yet, this is the very thing a docetic phantom Jesus could not do—die for our sins—if Jesus was not truly human.

John's whole point is God not only showed us his love (and therefore defined love along the lines of the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ, his own beloved son), but as John says, the cross is the very essence of God's love—"this is love!" And such love has its origins in God, who is love.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, by denying that Jesus was truly human, the false teachers were also denying that in the death of Jesus, God saves us from our sins. God's love is manifest when he sent Christ into the world. And God's love is defined by the sacrifice of Christ. While we should have been the objects of God's wrath, God, demonstrating his love for sinners, sent Jesus to die for all those whom he will make alive through the preaching of the gospel. Those who know God through Christ must love their brothers and sisters. Yet, true love is not found *in us*, but in what God did *for us*. Thus God's love in Christ—specifically the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ, for us, and in our place, is the basis of our love for others. To put it another way, if we trust in Christ's death to save us, and know ourselves to be unworthy sinners, then we must strive to love all those other unworthy sinners for whom Christ died. The command to love our fellow Christians is a command that cannot be truly understood apart from the cross of Christ.

In the light of this, John spells out the indicative and imperative in verse 11. "*Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*" When we consider the love of God in light of the cross of Christ—"God so loved us," then we must respond accordingly, "*we ought to love one another.*" This is why the Reformed have been concerned to argue that the commandment to "love our neighbor" when considered apart from the cross (the gospel) not only gives us no power to obey its demand, it actually condemns us. Commanding me to love my neighbor (apart from the gospel) only makes me hate my neighbor (because I can't love them and they only increase my own sin and condemnation). But showing me God's love for his people in the suffering of Christ, then suddenly I find myself loving my neighbor. This is how John frames the commandment. If we miss this, we miss the main point, and we are only condemned by John's command. But when the commandment is viewed through the lens of the suffering of Christ (the gospel), suddenly my neighbor becomes lovable!

Continuing to flesh out the point that we should not speculate about God's attributes, but consider God's love in light of the person and work of his son Jesus, in verse 12, John states, "*No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.*" We are creatures bound by time and space. God is not a creature and is bound by neither. In his gospel (4:24), John states that "God is Spirit," therefore no human being can see him and live. This is why it is only so much foolishness to speculate about God's nature and attributes apart from his self-revelation in Scripture. God's love is manifest in the person and work of his son, and is applied to us by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in Christ, we can say with all certainty that God's love is manifest. If we love one another (the fruit of Christ's giving us life, dying for us, and interceding for us), God's love can be said to abide in us.

In fact, John can even say Christ's love is perfected in us. Again, we should not take this to mean that we reach a point where we can love others perfectly, or know the "perfect" love of God (and we are in some way deficient or negligent if we haven't). Rather, John's point is that God's love is made manifest in

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<sup>2</sup> Stott, The Letters of John, 164.

Christ's person and work, and is then applied to us so that it is made perfect (or better, "brought to completion"). Those who know Christ, and who have considered the meaning of the cross, will enjoy that loving fellowship with their fellow sinners. John's point here is simply that we can indeed work backwards from the presence of Christian love and fellowship in our midst to the fact that it is God's love which dwells in us, indeed which completes us. And this love is not only manifest in the cross, it is the goal of Christ's work. As he saves us from our sins, Jesus actually brings us to a place where we do indeed love one another. Given the depths of our sinfulness, that is rather remarkable!

In verse 13, John returns to the topic of the assurance of salvation and how "we know that we know." This, of course, is a response to the Gnostic stress upon secret knowledge and enlightenment. Says John, "*By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.*" Given the truth of what John has just said about the work of Christ as the supreme manifestation of God's love, we can draw the following conclusions. The first is the presence of love is the proof that we abide in God and he in us. This comes about, John says, because of the work of the Holy Spirit. Apart from the Spirit indwelling us, we not only would not believe in Christ and trust in his death, we would remain unable and uninterested in loving our brothers and sisters in Christ. John is not saying if we love our neighbors, the Spirit will indwell us. Quite the opposite, John is saying that the presence of love of neighbor in our midst is the fruit of the Spirit's indwelling, not its cause.<sup>3</sup> The Spirit's presence is the proof that we abide in Christ. Because of the work of God's Spirit, we know that we know.

The second thing we can conclude, says John, is that the work of the Spirit in our midst is directly tied to the truth of the gospel. "*And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.*" The Spirit is not going to lead us away from that flesh and blood Savior to another Jesus who has supposedly revealed himself to an enlightened few, who, in turn, will now tell us the secrets which Jesus supposedly revealed to them. No, John and the apostles, saw the Jesus whom the Father sent. John bears witness to the truth of what he himself has seen. "We have seen, and therefore we testify!" Jesus is the Savior of the world. He was sent by God to save his people. And to fulfill his mission, Jesus took to himself a true human nature. There is no Christianity and no salvation from sin if he didn't.

Indeed, John goes on to say, "*Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.*" John's opponents cannot affirm such a thing. They may claim to have knowledge but they know nothing of the true Christ. The phantom Jesus is not the Son of God, nor that Savior God sent into the world. But whoever confesses that Jesus is eternal God *and* a flesh and blood Savior (i.e. God's Son) is assured by God's Spirit that God abides in them, and that they abide in God. And so as John puts it in verse 16, "*So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.*" For John the entire gospel stands or falls based upon the truth of Christ's incarnation. And since Christians trust in Jesus as God manifest in the flesh, they have believed the testimony of those who saw Jesus in the days of his flesh (and so they "know" what John is saying is true). And because they too have trusted in that one whom John has proclaimed to them, they know that the love of God has been manifest in Jesus Christ and his cross, for all to see. Christians know what it means to say "God is love." They know that in affirming that glorious truth, they are also affirming that God abides in them, and they abide in him.

All of this, John says, is for the purpose of assuring us of God's favor. In Philippians, Paul makes the same point John is making this way—"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will

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<sup>3</sup> Stott, Letters of John, 169.

*bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*” God is not going to begin his redemptive work in us and then just give up if we don’t perform up to expectations. In verse 17, John speaks of this assurance in very similar terms. *“By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world.”* John has already used the key word here (“confidence”) in chapter two, verse 28—*“And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.”* Here in chapter four, John is reminding us that God’s loving purpose will ultimately bring everything to the end which God has appointed. In this case, John says, there is coming a day of judgment, something which people usually fear (and with good reason). Standing before God and being judged for our sin is not a pleasant thought.

But because of God’s love (which God has perfected in us—through giving us life, sending Christ to die and to intercede for us, along with giving us the Holy Spirit who now indwells us) we ought not be afraid, but remain confident. The reason why we are not to be afraid is that this confidence is not found within us (in our obedience, our ability to love our brothers and sisters, our “goodness” or any other such thing). Rather, our confidence is to be found in God’s love, specifically as that love is manifest in the cross of Jesus, who offered up himself as a propitiation for our sins. If Jesus has already taken upon himself God’s wrath, for us, and in our place, how can God pour out his wrath upon us on the day of judgment, when Christ has already turned that wrath away. No, we are to have confidence on the day of judgment because of Christ’s finished work on our behalf.

In fact, as John puts it in verse 18, *“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.”* The only way not to fear the coming judgment is to look to the cross. In the death of Jesus, we see the love of God perfected. And that love should cast out our fear. Christ has already endured judgment day for us and in our place. This means that the second coming of Christ is not something to be feared, but greatly anticipated.

Therefore, says John, in words which wonderfully clarify the difference between the indicative and the imperative (the law and the gospel), *“We love because he first loved us.”* John’s point cannot be missed. We can love others only because of God’s prior love for us. We cannot gaze upon the cross and not see God’s love, and not feel compelled to reflect God’s love in our own lives. John sees the connection too. As he reminds us in verses 20-21, those who understand the suffering of Christ (in his true human nature, for us, and in our place) will surely strive to love their equally unlovable and sinful brothers and sisters in Christ. *“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”* What we believe about God, John says, must work itself out in our actions. If we have truly come to understand God’s love for us, how can we not love those for whom Christ has died and for whom he is presently interceding? Those who teach and love false doctrine, and who brag about their victory over sin, simply do not and cannot get it. How can you love God, while trying to persuade someone to embrace the spirit of the antichrist? You cannot.

Where John Wesley missed the mark is in trying to quantify the amount and intensity of the love we must have for others, all the while urging us on until we reach perfect obedience. But this completely misses the fact that for John it is not the degree, but the presence of love for others which proves we are Christ’s, especially in light of the behavior of those who trust in the phantom docetic Jesus who could not truly lay down his life for our sins. And that is why it is so important to keep the historical context in mind, as well as give due consideration to the distinction between indicatives and imperatives.

### **III. What then, do we say by way of application?**

Although I've never loved anyone the way I am supposed to, the fact is that what truly matters is not my ability to love, but that God loved me first. The commandment to love my neighbor gives me no ability to actually love my neighbor. But the glorious news that God's love is revealed in the death of Jesus (God manifest in the flesh) for my sins actually creates in my heart a love for my neighbor. And this cannot happen in the lives of those who reject our Lord's true humanity and who would leave us with a "Savior" who cannot save us.

As John reminds us, "*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*" And because God first loved us in Christ, and then sent Jesus in the flesh to suffer and die for all my sins, John can also remind us of the glorious fact that, "*By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world.*" That fully divine, truly human Jesus, *has* saved me from my sin. In this God's love is completed and I need never fear judgment day again. Amen.