

“This is How We Know: God is Love” (1 John Pt. 3)
(1 John 4:7-12)

• **The Great Dilemma**

- “*God is love.*” What a great theme! You look at the preaching schedule, you see “God is Love,” and think, *This is going to be great! Who doesn’t want to hear that message? This should be easy.* And then, you start thinking about it. And you start reading the Bible. And you start looking at your life. *Oh boy...this isn’t easy!*
 - Welcome to our series on 1 John, 1 of 3 letters to the early church written by the Apostle John, who also wrote the Gospel of John. He was an eye-witness of all Jesus said and did, a disciple and close friend of the Lord. John wanted to make sure we know *Jesus* is for real, and *Jesus* is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. In week 1, we started with a big question: Who is God and how do we know Him? Last week, Emily taught us how *God is light* and how *we in the light*. Today, it’s another big one, and I’ll warn you, it’s not as easy as it sounds: *God is Love*. Let’s pray.
- **“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.” (1 John 4:7-12)**
- *God is love.* Everybody likes to talk about that—even non-Christians are cool with that. It sounds really nice. But here’s the question: *what is love?* We know the Great Commandment: Jesus said Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength—with all you are. And love your neighbor as yourself (even if your neighbor is an enemy). That’s the sum of God’s law, all God’s teachings. We smile and nod. Love God, love others? *Thumbs up. Who can argue with that?*
 - But actually, the great commandment creates for us a *great dilemma*: because we find that God’s most basic commandment is also the one we find impossible to keep consistently. Love God with *all* you are. Really? Really? Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Really? Really?
 - If you honestly face the truth, you find this strikes at the heart of humanity’s problem: God is love, and we are not. I am not. God’s highest call is to love Him and love others above all. And I do not. My heart is broken, it’s faulty, it’s corrupted. Apart from God’s redemption, I am ruled not by the law of love, but by the law of sin and death. And as much as I can talk about how nice it sounds to live in love, if I don’t find a way to deal with my sin, I cannot really live in love. And if I can’t live in love, John says, I don’t live in God. That’s the hard truth. We don’t know what love really is. And even when we do, we find ourselves unable to live in it.

• **How to Know True Love**

- You would think that as much as our culture talks about love—songs, movies, cute little sayings—we would understand it pretty well by now. Go through a list of all the songs you’ve heard about love. *All you need is love, da da da da da... “L” is for the way you look at me... What is love? Baby don’t hurt me, don’t hurt me... Your love got me looking so crazy right now... I want your love, love, love, love...*
 - Why is it that people who get famous for singing about love often have some of the worst relationships? Take it closer to home: Why is it that some of our closest personal relationships, the people we love most, are also the people we tend to hurt the most and have the hardest time consistently loving? I mean, I love my kids, I’ll give my life for them. But sometimes I’ve failed to love them, and I’ve hurt them—I’ve hurt my children, because without God, my default is selfishness. We talk about love. But we don’t know what love really is.
- Here’s where John comes in, with truth that shines with blinding light into the darkness: **“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.” (1 John 3:16)** How do we know what love is? Look at what Jesus did. It’s impossible stand at the cross, truly see it, and not be changed by it.

- Think of the greatest examples of love you can imagine—mothers and children, faithful marriages, soldiers sacrificing their lives—these are just *small reflections* of the holy love of God. God gave everything, sacrificed everything, *when we were still His enemies, when all we deserved was judgement.* **“But God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us.”** (Rom. 5:8)
- Thomas Aquinas gave a timeless definition: **“To love is to will the good of another.”** Real love is not just a feeling, it’s not self-serving affection, it’s not using someone to make us feel good. Real love is demonstrated in the Son of God becoming one of us, giving His life on a cross to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. In a world under the law of sin and death, God’s love looks like carrying a cross. That’s what love is. **“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.”** (1 John 4:7-8)
- **How to Become True Love**
 - But we still have a problem: even when we see and know love for what it truly is, we are no closer to being able to live in it. Without God’s help, our best attempts at love are still mingled with selfishness. We need to know how to become love, like Jesus.
 - That’s why John doesn’t just talk about love—he talks about *truth*, and about *sin*. Because if we’re going to know what love is and *live in it*, we’re going to have to deal with our sin. This is what’s wrong in our world: we like the idea of love, we like talking about it, singing about it—but we don’t know how to really live it because we don’t want to deal with sin. If you only want to talk about love, and you never want to talk about sin, then all you’ll ever do is *talk about* love. But if you want to *live in love*, then you have to *deal with sin*. Once you do that, you’ll learn quickly that you need help from the outside, from someone much more powerful than you.
 - There are only two ways God deals with sin: judgement or redemption. Judgement isn’t a contradiction of God’s love—the Bible says God is holy, righteous, and just—none of that contradicts love, because love always aligns with what is good and true. So, a holy loving God has to deal with evil—either judge it, or redeem it. He gives us a choice by paying the cost Himself—so we can either accept His mercy, or face judgement.
 - **“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.”** (1 John 4:9-12)
 - Jesus is the answer because He shows us what true love is, He gives us true love, and He deals with our sin so that we can live in love. Once you repent of sin and receive that kind of love, you’re able to give it to others. So John goes on to say, **“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.”** (4:16)
 - When you think about a relationship that went wrong for you—in the church, the family, a friendship, a marriage, think about this. *In that relationship, were you knowing and relying on the love God has for you and that person? Were you living in God’s love for you and for that person?* Sometimes it goes wrong even when you do, because you can’t control what the other person does, and they may have chosen not to. But if at least one person in that equation is living in and relying on the love God has for them, there’s hope that as you live in God’s love, God’s love can reach the other person too. Rely on God’s love, and let Him work.
 - 1 Corinthians 13 is the famous “love chapter” read at weddings. It says, **“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”** (13:4-8) We read this and mistakenly think this is *how* we love: ok, so if I just be patient, and kind, and don’t envy, and don’t boast, and don’t be prideful...and keep no record of wrongs...and always persevere...and never fail...that’s how I become a loving person! But this passage isn’t about how to love—it’s about *what love is*. And

once again, it shows us how often we *don't!* Just put your name in that verse: “_____ is patient, _____ is kind. _____ does not envy, _____ does not boast, _____ is not proud. _____ does not dishonor others, _____ is not self-seeking, _____ is not easily angered, _____ does not keep record of wrongs...” (Do I need to go on?) When I do that, I see God has brought me a long way so far, but I've also got a *long way to go* in my journey of becoming more like Jesus as His grace does its work in me.

- **Draw them Fresh from God each Day**

- All of this boils down to John's repeated theme: *this is how we know!* If you want to know what love really is, look at Jesus. If you want to know how to become love, follow Jesus. Repent of your sin, receive the gift of God's eternal life by putting your complete trust in Him, and surrender to Him as your Lord to follow Him daily. As you walk with Him, His grace will transform you from the inside out, and you'll discover what it really means to be born of God. You'll discover what Romans 5 says, **“And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” (Rom. 5:5)**
- With Jesus, it's possible for people who were once enslaved to sin and selfishness to love in extraordinary ways—to love like Jesus. And it changes the world. Look through Christian history, look at stories in your own church family, and you'll see that where Jesus is at work in someone's life, extravagant love breaks through.
- Look at Stephen, the first martyr in the book of Act. They were *stoning him to death* because He proclaimed Christ—and even as they were brutally taking his life, he cried out to heaven, *Lord, don't hold this sin against them*—just like Jesus did from the cross!
- Look at Corrie Ten Boom, a holocaust survivor who became an evangelist. Both her father and sister lost their lives in the concentration camp, but she survived. Just a few years after the war was over, she was back in Germany preaching the Gospel of God's love and forgiveness. After the talk, a German man approached her—he didn't recognize her, but she recognized him—he was one of the guards from the concentration camp where she'd been. He had since become a Christian. He asked if she would forgive him, and reached out his hand to shake hers. She writes, *“I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart... ‘Jesus, help me!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.’ And so, woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. ‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’ For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then... I wish I could say that merciful and charitable thoughts just naturally flowed from me from then on. But they didn't. If there's one thing I've learned at 80 years of age, it's that I can't store up good feelings and behavior—but only draw them fresh from God each day.”*
- There it is. Extraordinary things are possible in us when we receive the extraordinary love of God, revealed in Christ, and walk in it daily. *And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.* So, what's He telling you to do today? Do you know the love God has for you, have you received it and surrendered your life to Him? Do you rely on the love He has for you—with your friendships, co-workers, marriage, family, even enemies? Is there someone you need to forgive? Is there someone you need to share God's love with? What is God saying to you today, and who are you going to share it with? Think on that, pray on that, and go walk it out with His help. It won't be easy, but it will be good—and with God, all things are possible.