

How To Say, "I Love You!"

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The Church And Christian Relationships

1 John 4:7-21

There is a wonderful scene in Fiddler on the Roof, where Tevye says to his wife, Golda, one night as they are lying in bed, "Golda, do you love me?"

And she breaks out with this song about "Do I love you? For 25 years, I have cooked your meals, milked the cow, kept the Sabbath, fought with you, and talked with you. For 25 years I have slept with you, we have had kids together. If that is not love, what is?"

This morning I want to continue in the series that I have been doing on the church and our personal relationships with each other. I would like to deal with the most fundamental command that God gives us in his Word as we relate to each other -- the command to love one another. The passage that we are going to look at today is from 1 John 4. John says,

"Dear friends, let us love one another. For love comes from God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

But like Golda in Fiddler on the Roof, every one of us asks the question: Well, what do you want from me? Have I not been saying to you and showing you that I love you in a thousand different ways? The Bible says we should love each other, but how do we do that?

Most of the books out now about love are primarily about romantic love -- 100 Ways; 1000 Ways to Say I Love You; give your partner a backrub; get some bubble bath; invite him to a spontaneous picnic in the park; surprise her with a romantic dinner; buy him chocolates; buy her diamonds; fill the car with gas.

The Internet even offers you help in expressing to someone you have just met that you think you have fallen in love. Ladies, those of you who are single, or if you are married, imagine yourself when you were single, how many of you would have responded to any of these pick-up lines:

Am I dead, angel, because this must be heaven?

Can I borrow a quarter? What for? I want to call my mom and tell her I just met the girl of my dreams.

How about this winner: "Don't worry about it. Nothing you have ever done before counts. The only thing that matters is that we are together."

I love this one: Hi, I suffer from amnesia. Do I come here often?

Or how about this for getting the sympathy vote: I only have three months to live.

Here is a direct approach: I am new in town. Could you give me directions to your apartment?

Here is one that plays on an old movie theme. Walk up to a woman and say: "Bond. James Bond."

Sometimes women may fall for syrup, I don't know. But one of the suggestions is that you walk up to a woman and ask her for the time. When she says, "10:30," you

say, “okay. So today is September 22nd, 1999, at 10:30. Thanks, I just wanted to remember the exact moment when I met you.”

How do we say, “I love you?” You could buy one of those books – 100 or 1000 ways to say it. You could search the net for a great pick up line.

Or you could examine the encyclopedia of human behavior that has developed the passionate love scale to assess the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components to love. As Hatfield and Rapson, these two researchers discuss in their 1993 article, “Passionate love is a complex functional whole including appraisals, appreciations, subjective feelings, expressions, patterned physiological processes, action tendencies and instrumental behaviors.” And then these researches put together their passionate love scale. And based on things like your patterned physiological process and your action tendencies, as well as your instrumental behaviors (whatever those things are), you can rate the passion in your relationship.

I am sorry, honey, but your instrumental behaviors have been off recently. I would say the passion of our relationship could, at best, be rated at 6.4.

Other scientists have actually put together a mathematical formula for calculating couples love for each other. It wouldn't be America unless something like love was quantified and we could attach a number to it. But these scientists have an equation involving four factors – person factors, other factors, person x others factors, and environmental factors. And then they have a series of hypotheticals in which they work out these person factors and other factors. And it is all eventually put on a graph and you can know exactly where you line up; what percentile you are in.

Now the analysis of love that I find the silliest is the one that attempts to reduce love to our biochemistry. Neuroscientists for the last few decades have begun to speculate about the biological bases for love and they have identified a hormone, oxytocin, which is suggested to be at the core of many of our expressions of love to each other.

Now, over against the modernist reduction approach to all of life, including something so precious as love, where we reduce love simply down to a function of our body chemistry. Or we try to quantify it mathematically using some arbitrary equation, or we are trying to find out what percentile we are in or where our passion is on a scale of 1-10, the Bible draws our attention upward toward God and says that the moment you start thinking about love, your thoughts should be directed heavenward. Any definition of love needs to include something about the Divine, the Lord. As you approach the subject of love, you are like Moses approaching the burning bush. You are on holy ground. We are not talking any longer about pickup lines when we connect with this word love. Rather, we are talking about the essence of the Creator of the universe.

This morning, as we move forward in this series on relationships, I want to expand your minds. I want to elevate your thoughts. I want to lift up your eyes on this most precious subject, the subject of love. I have called today's talk, “How to Say ‘I Love You.’” Let's pray.

If you have a Bible, I would like you to open it to 1 John 4:7, where we read,

“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.”

Twenty one times in verses 7-21 of 1 John 4, the apostle John uses some variation of the Greek noun “agape,” which means love. It is real clear that love is the theme of 1 John 4:7-21. The word love is mentioned twenty one times.

And if you want to learn how to interpret the scriptures, one thing that you want to pay attention to is repeated words. When the author of a text repeats himself 21 times, it is a good bet that that is probably close to the theme of a passage.

Now three times John urges us to love each other. In verse 7, he commands us; exhorts us: Let us love one another. In verse 11, he says that love is our duty: Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. He reminds us of our duty to love one another. Then in verse 12, he raises our love for each other as a condition for God’s love being perfected in us: No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Love each other, love each other, and love each other – three times. Twenty-one times he tells us to love.

Frances Schaeffer called love the mark of the Christian. Love is our distinctive. Love is what marks the Christian off. But you know, as I said last week, so much of our Christianity is mixed up with American individualism, a self-centeredness, a focus on what we are getting and our needs and wants. So much of our Christianity is mixed up with American individualism that the mark of the Christian, love, is often absent in our relationships with each other here in the church.

Robert Bellah, who is a University of Berkeley Professor of Sociology, edited a wonderful book, truly a landmark book on American individualism, called Habits of the Heart. And he talks about the kind of religion that most Americans practice. He describes a woman named Sheila Larson, who is a young nurse, and who describes her faith as “Sheila-ism”. She says, “I believe in God, I am just not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It is called “Sheila-ism”. I just obey my own little voice and live to fulfill my own needs.” So next to Judaism and Christianity, we need to set not only Islam and Buddhism and Hinduism in the melting pot of religions, but we also need to set Sheila-ism and Rich-ism and Danny-ism and Penny-ism and all of the rest of us worshipping and bowing down to the altars of ourselves. Richie-ism.

Now, let’s look at what the apostle John said. He says, “Beloved, [or friends – friends is weak; the NIV version has a very weak translation. It literally reads, Beloved, loved ones], let us love one another for love comes from God and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love.”

How do I say I love you? We say I love you when we allow the Lord to be God. John speaks to us about the divine source of love. Love is of God.

We need to be careful here and not pull this next phrase out of context when he says, “Let everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” He is not saying if you meet someone who loves, they are by definition Christian, no matter what they believe about Jesus or how they approach God or even whether they approach God, as long as they are good loving people, they are included in the family of God. Some people have pulled 1 John 4:7-8 totally out of context and made up their own religion – a kind of universalism of love.

But John is speaking to the church. And he is saying within the church all the people who say they believe in Jesus, who say they are Christians, how do we mark off those who really are Christians? They are the ones who love. And whoever doesn't love and is in the church does not know God because God is love.

How do I say I love you? I say I love you when I allow the Lord to be God of my life and of this relationship.

Listen to me. This is an important point. The difference between the world of the Bible and America is that America takes this last little phrase "God is love" and turns it on its head. Our culture, our American culture, is upside down because we take the truth of the text, God is love, and we turn it upside down and say, "Love is God." In America, we don't say, "God is love." In America, we say, "Love is God." In other words, love by which we generally mean our passions, our desire for someone else, our erotic feelings, love, conquers everything else. Love triumphs everything, because love is God.

So we bow at the altar of Sheila-ism or Richie-ism, but we also bow at the altar of love. And at the altar of love, we sacrifice everything else.

John Keats, the English poet said,

"I cannot exist without you. I am forgetful of every thing but seeing you again – my life seems to stop there – I see no further. You have absorb'd me. I have a sensation at the present moment as though I were dissolving...I have been astonished that Men could die martyrs for religion – I have shudder'd at it – I shudder no more – I could be martyr'd for my religion – Love is my religion – I could die for that – I could die for you. My creed is love and you are its only tenet. You have ravish'd me away by a power I cannot resist."

Think about this with me and tell me if you don't observe this as the truth in the United States right now, and even in the church. What kind of definition would we come up with for God, if we were trying to say what is someone's God? How would you figure out what someone's God is?

You would say, "Well, God is whatever for you is the highest end of your existence. God is what you are ultimately living for. God is the one that you would sacrifice anything for. God is whatever you are willing to give everything up for. God is the thing or the one that you are pinning your hopes on for happiness. What you are looking to to really make you happy and fulfilled and satisfied and secure. That is what, for you, is God.

It could be money, recognition, and professional attainment, seeing your name in some journal somewhere. Being elected president of some society. But for many Americans, love is God. And at the altar of love, we would sacrifice anything and everything.

How many times have we watched this play itself out both within the church and without? You have a guy who is married. He has a few kids and even claims to be a Christian. But he meets another woman at work and falls in love with her. Since for him, despite his confession, love is God, it is the highest end of his life, this guy sacrifices on the altar of this new found love, his kids, his marriage, his vows, his relationships in the church, his integrity, even his walk with God. He is willing to lay it all down for love.

Or what about the woman who is married and has a kid, but she is in what she calls a loveless marriage. It is nothing horrible. It is not profoundly abusive. But there is no real communication. The husband works all the time. There is no affection. This woman has been planning for years that once her son gets out of high school, she is going to divorce her husband. Why? Well, even though she claims to be a Christian, which means at the very least to endeavor to follow Jesus and obey his commands, even though she claims to be a Christian, her ultimate commitment is not to Jesus. It is to this ideal of marital love, without which, she believes her life will be ultimately meaningless. It is not Jesus Christ and her relationship with him, that gives her meaning, it is love. And her so-called Christian friends will surround her and because their commitment is not ultimately to Jesus Christ, but to love, because they believe like the rest of America that love is God, her friends will surround her with counsel that sounds very much like the following:

Of course, you know that it is technically wrong for you to get divorced according to some super rigorous ultra legalistic understanding of Jesus' words. But who in the world can blame you for escaping a marriage that is loveless. How can you go through your whole life and not find the ultimate reason for your existence?

Or we have the single adult who has had numerous sexual encounters and several live-in partners. Nothing has ever really resulted in marriage, although they may have gotten close a couple of times. What is the issue in all the partners and the live-ins? What is the issue in the single adult's life? The person is searching for real love. That is what is driving the hunger.

In the same way that 15 centuries ago Christians went out to the desert to get away from society so that they could find God, in the same way that Roman Catholics have, for centuries, joined convents and monasteries so that they could find God, Americans today are racing around, sacrificing everything to find, what for them, is God – love.

But you know the Lord is not going to give up his position of God of the universe. He is not going to get off the throne and allow some concept of love to sit on the throne and rule our lives. The truth is there is no way for a human being to really love another person until they first straighten out in their lives who is going to be Lord. Are we going to worship Sheila-ism, Richie-ism – myself? Or are we going to worship some concept of love that I don't have. Or is Jesus Christ going to be my Lord? Until Christ is your Lord, forget about love. If love is your God, forget about both God and love, because you will miss both.

Well, let's consider this even more. What does it mean to say I love you? We say I love you when we remain committed despite people's failures. The Bible says here in 1 John 4:8, this most profound thing: God is love. What God is like, in his essence, is love. Love is not just one of many of the activities of God. He loves and he also creates, he also judges and sustains the world. But God is love is saying not just one of his many activities is love, but we are saying that all of God's activities are loving and come out of the inner essence, which is his heart of love. So when God disciplines us, he does so out of love. And when he creates the world, he does so out of love. And when he answers our prayers, he does because he is loving. And when he doesn't answer our prayers, he doesn't answer because he is loving. When he judges the world and when he saves some, both judgment and salvation come from love. God is love.

And we must not impose upon God our faulty definitions of love. Listen. Our definition of love can be as silly as 'I am new in town, can you give me directions to your apartment.' Our definition of love can be just some pick up line. Certainly, our experience of love is that love, humanly speaking, is something that is very inconsistent. It blows hot and cold. Sometimes we really love someone and sometimes we don't. But because God is the source and criterion for our understanding of love, we cannot say I love you unless we are committed in a faithful, consistent way to someone else despite their failures.

God is the one in the book of Hosea tells Hosea to go and marry a prostitute who he knows will be unfaithful to him. But God says to Hosea: your love for this prostitute, this unfaithful, inconsistent wife, is like my love for my people. I love, despite my people's failures. I am a God of the second chance, the third chance, and the fifth chance.

We live in a world right now where the only constant thing is change. People change, spouse's change, jobs change, and careers change. Businessmen and women are constantly faced with changing economies, changing markets, changing technologies, changing types of employees, different legal environments. Every business book right now is about negotiating change. Where do you find an anchor for your soul in the midst of all this change? Where is the person who is experiencing massive change, get centered? Where do you get stabilized? Is there anything that lasts longer than the current trend or fad, the current innovation? Is there someone who will stand by you no matter what? They will stand by you when you are awake at night and when you lose your father to cancer and your mother to Alzheimer's. When you lose your looks to aging or your marriage to neglect or your reputation to your own stupidity.

Where do I find the one who will hang in there with me no matter what? John says to look to God because God is love. And he defines what love is – committed, unchanging, the God of the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th chances.

John goes on to write this. "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."

How did God love us? By sending his Son into the world and then allowing his Son to die for us. John is talking about the Incarnation and Atonement of Christ.

Love is so intangible. I tried to define it and came up with some of those silly definitions at the beginning of this talk. Often time's love is like a fog. You try to grab hold of it and you can't. John says: Do you want to get a handle on love? What does it feel like and look like and smell like and act like? It acts like, looks like, feels like and sounds like God taking on flesh and kneeling down to our level. Becoming one of us.

Have you ever seen an adult talk to a child? One position is to stand erect and talk to down to the child and make the child strain its neck to look up. But love kneels down. Adults kneel down and look children in the eye. That is what God did when he came to us in the person of Jesus. Instead of standing above us and making us strain to look up, God got down on his knees and down to our level.

Two old baseball players, Phil Rizzuto and Joe Torre were talking once. Phil Rizzuto was a long time announcer of the Yankees. Joe Torre was the Yankees

Manager. Phil Rizzuto said to him, "Joe, you know, you could manage a lot better if you sat up here in the press box with me. You could see the whole field. You could call down plays from up here."

Joe Torre said, "I couldn't manage from up here. I gotta be down on the field because it is only down on the field that I can look my players in the eye."

How do we say I love you? When we kneel down. When we get past our "I am better than you" "I am superior to you" when we look each other in the eye and get on the same level.

Another way to think about it is we love each other when we enter each other's worlds. That is what God did in Christ. He entered our world. So much of the time we are living such self-centered existences, that we pass by other people who are struggling, and who need a helping hand, without entering their world. You see a woman who has a baby in her arms at the grocery store. She is struggling to put groceries in her car. We say I love you to that woman when we offer to help her load her car.

There is a pregnant woman on the bus and the bus is crowded. We say I love you to that woman when we get up and give her our seat.

You are a stepparent and you have just entered a family with a couple of teenage kids, who don't like you. How do we say I love you to a stepchild? By entering their world. By kneeling down. By getting off the high horse of what I deserve because of my age and status, and working hard to understand them, they're thoughts, their struggles, and their anger.

Do you know one of the ways that God knelt down in Jesus Christ? 1 John 2 says, "My dear children I write this to you so that you will not sin, but if anyone does sin, we have an advocate before the Father – Jesus Christ the Righteous One."

We kneel down and help the weak when we become his or her advocate. When we speak up for people who can't plead their own case. Listen, some of you are doing that. You are saying I love you by being advocates for people who can't speak for themselves. I am so proud of many of you who are working for life in this community. You are talking with pregnant women. You are encouraging them away from the option of aborting their children. You love them toward making the loving choice of keeping their children alive. You are advocates for those who don't have a voice – the unborn.

Some of you have become advocates for the disabled in this church and in the community. The reason why we have ministries to children and to adults who have some kind of disability is because Deb Peterman and others advocated for them. And we have ministries for people here in Columbus who are HIV positive and who have AIDS because there are people like Sharon Fryer and others who said I love you, by kneeling down and giving voice to those who aren't able to speak for themselves.

Let me suggest one powerful way that this church and you, as an individual, can show love to Christian brothers and sisters around the world. We have brothers and sisters around the world, Christian brothers and sisters who are being imprisoned and tortured and beaten and martyred for no other reason except that they are Christians. In the Sudan right now the Christians in the South of Sudan are subjected to torture, rape and starvation for their refusal to convert to Islam. Christian children are routinely sold into slavery. Muslims who convert to Christianity in the north face the death penalty. In the decade of the 1980's and 90's, Sudan's death toll of more than 1.9

million is greater than that of the slaughter in Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo combined. But the Sudan has no oil and it is of no strategic interest to the United States and it doesn't show up on President Clinton's favorability index with any particular group in this country and so our Christian brothers and sisters are slaughtered.

There is an organization called Voice of the Martyrs that reports on the condition of the persecuted church worldwide for the purpose of gathering Christians to pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters and also to petition our government for action. Any of you who are on the Web can find it by just looking at www.persecution.com. This is a key moment right now because the federal government is holding hearings on the church in Sudan. You may want to call your congressman or email Mike DeWine or George Voinovich to take action. America has exerted its power all over the world and yet has stood by inactively and inattentively in the Sudanese crisis. Your letter or phone call, taking five minutes out of your day, to get in touch with Voice of the Martyrs or our government is one way to say I love you to your brothers and sisters around the world.

And when we share love. John writes:

"No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and in us because he has given us his Spirit."

He connects our love with each other with the indwelling of God's Spirit in us. There are lots of people you meet in the church, which is John's concern, but also outside the church that you don't like. Their personality grates on you. Maybe they are way talkative. They just talk the scales off of a fish. In the course of an hour's conversation, they talk for 59 minutes and 20 seconds while you are sitting there thinking, "Are they ever going to come up for air." At the end of their 59-minute monologue, they might look at you and say, "Well, how are you?" And just as you are about to answer, they begin to talk.

Maybe you don't like someone because they seem really arrogant to you, conceited and it grates against you like fingernails on a chalkboard. Or you don't like their insensitivity. Or you don't like the way they keep their home and it is a big mess. Or you don't like the emphasis they place on their home and that everything seems to be in its place and for you that grates on you because you take it to be stuck up -- a misplacing of their priorities. Or you don't like the way they raise their kids, or you don't like their kids. Or you don't like their dog and their dog doesn't like you. They're your neighbors and they are noisy or dirty or rude or their trailer is parked on your green lawn.

There are a million reasons why we might not like someone. And yet John three times says to us that we must choose to love. Beloved, let us each love one another. Love is the mark of the Christian. Love is the imitation of God. Love is the essence of God. Love is the action of God in Jesus Christ. How do we love the mass of people that we don't like? And often, some of those people are very near to us. They may be in our families. They may be a stepparent or stepchild. They may be an in-law, a son in law or mother in law. They may be someone in your kinship or women's group. How do you love someone you don't like?

You have seen those bracelets WWJD – what would Jesus do? They have sold about 50 million of them. My good friend, Todd Hunter, who is the national director of the AVC, our church is a part of the AVC – we have about 900 churches now worldwide

and are in about 50 different countries. The movement just started 17 years ago and has spread very rapidly. But my good friend, Todd Hunter, said that those bracelets WWJD really frustrate him. He says, "I get so frustrated by the question: what would Jesus do. I might as well wear a bracelet that says WWMJD – what would Michael Jordan do? What good does that bracelet do? I mean let's say you are playing basketball and you are being guarded by a really tall defender. You look down at your bracelet and it says WWMJD – what would Michael Jordan do? And you remember, well what Michael Jordan would do is he would put the ball behind his back, drive by the defender on the baseline, leap from about 14' away from the basket, do a 360 degree spin, switch hands, and while the defender stood there with his mouth open and his feet glued to the ground, Michael Jordan would slam dunk the basketball with both hands behind his head. That's what Michael Jordan would do.

My friend, Todd Hunter, said, "The issue for me is not knowing what Michael Jordan would do. I know what he would do. The problem is that I can't do it." And the issue for us is not knowing what Jesus would do with those unlikable people around us – the talkative ones, the arrogant ones, the insensitive ones, the ones whose dogs are trying to mate with our legs – we know what Jesus would do. He would love them. The problem is we can't do it.

So John says, "We know we live in him because he has given us of his Spirit." It says in verse 12, "If we love each other, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." And in verse 15 he says, "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God, so we know and rely on the love God has for us."

Here is the idea. Like water that can never rise above its own level, it can never run uphill, unless it is pumped up hill by some external force, our love cannot rise above the level of our own flesh. We can't by ourselves, believe the way we should. We can't by ourselves in our own energy, obey the way we should. We can't by ourselves, in our own strength, love the way we should. Left to ourselves, we are unbelieving, disobedient and loveless. So how do I love that unlikable person? Not by trying to force myself to love them, nor simply by asking WWJD – what would Jesus do and try to do that. I have to be in a living relationship with God. I must be connected with God like branches are connected to a vine. Like fingers are connected to a hand. I must open my heart to him and ask the Lord for cleansing. Remove from his presence any obstacles of my sin through confession. I must live in God and God must live in me. And as I live in God in relationship to him, and he lives in me, by prayer, by filling myself with God's Word, by worshipping him, water is forced up hill. The most unnatural thing occurs. I get to love people I don't like. It is not will power. It is God power. It is the miracle of God working in you changing your heart.

And John tells us that love is not just some static thing that you just have a fixed quantity of love for another human being. You just have three pounds of love and that is all you will ever have. That is what people who are on the edge of separation believe. They look at the quantity of love they have for another person and this other person for them and they say, "We only have an ounce and a half of love. We might as well get separated."

But look at the precious promise that John makes. He says in verse 12: "No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God is in us and his love is made complete in us."

Here is what he is saying. As you relate to God, not the mates that you only have 1½ ounces of love for, not to the other person in your kinship group that you only have a ½ pound of love for – as you relate to God, you connect with him, you live in him, you pray to him – he gives you a supernatural desire, a supernatural power, something that goes beyond yourself, to love another. As we share that love, you actually take steps to be loving, to listen to the talkative person, to do acts of kindness for the arrogant person, to help the stepchild with their homework, or drive them somewhere, to write a thank you note to the negative in-law, to visit the cranky grandma at the nursing home – as we share love, our love grows and is made complete. It is filled out. That ounce and a half becomes 5-10-100 pounds of love.

It is a lie that we have this fixed quantity of love and cannot change. Of course, on our own it can't. But with God's help and our commitment to share and our commitment to step out, love grows.

I have watched this with couples whose embers of their marriage have been almost dead. There was virtually nothing glowing. The ashes had been poured over with water 15 times. I have watched this process. I have watched people first give themselves back to God and then commit themselves, even though they said, "I do not even like this other person," they committed themselves to share what God made and their marriages, today, are a testimony to the miracle of God. If they can do it, so can you. And you can do it in other relationships.

How do I say I love you? By overcoming our fear of rejection. John writes in verses 17-18:

"In this way love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the Day of Judgment because in this world we are like him. 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."

The Greek word for fear is "phobeomai" where we get the word phobia. When John says there is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, he is talking about the kind of fear that we often would associate with phobias, with being completely alarmed, being scared to death. The kind of fear that creates panic attacks. John says that our fears have to do with our worry about future pain or punishment. Many people do not draw near to God because they live in this constant phobia, this constant sense of dread that God must really be angry with them because of the way that they have sinned. I have lost God's affection. God is really going to get me now.

And so in this place of fear and dread, people hide from God. And some of you today are hiding from God. Oh, you might have resolved to try to clean up your life. You might have 1000 times resolved to repair the hurt that you have caused or the wrong that you have done, but you live with a constant sense of the disapproval of God over you. You live in fear, the fear of God's rejection, the fear of God's indifference.

What can drive out that fear? John says, "Perfect love drives out that fear – the perfect love of God." The love of a lover whose affection is constant and whose commitment is unchanging. We are all of us prodigal sons and daughters. We have all of us run away from our Father's house, as Jesus told the story in Luke 15. The boy ran away from his father's house. Took advantage of his father's good nature. Wasted the talents and the grace and generosity of his father. Was reduced to living in a pigsty. We are all of us like that, on the run from God the Father. But the story says that the

boy came to his senses and he returned to his father. He could not have done this if he dreaded the father's rejection. If he lived like a whipped dog waiting to be hit again as some of our disapproving consciences tell us God is like. When the son got to his father's house, we are told that the father ran out to greet him.

Anyone of us who today chooses to turn back to the Father; anyone of you today who says, "I want to come home. I have been on the run from God. But today I want to come home." God your Father will embrace you.

And we must overcome our fear of rejection. Every time we choose to love another person. There are people in the church you have hurt. There are people in your past you have hurt. There may be a spouse that you walked away from. They had their problems, but you walked away. There are children you have hurt. There are parents you have hurt. You have said there is too much water under the bridge and it was too long ago to repair that. If I reach out, I will just get a cold shoulder and be rejected.

Perfect love casts out that fear. God today says, "Love that person. Love that person." It is up to them regarding their reaction. But you love that person and let that love push the fear of rejection out of your life.

Last point. We say I love you when we treat one another with respect. John writes these convicting words. "We love because he first loved us." He is the initiator. This verse is true for the entirety of our Christian lives. I don't care how you work out your theology so long as God is always first and you are second, so long as his decision for you precedes your decision for him, so long as he is the lead partner in this two party dance. Explain it whatever way you want to explain it. We love God because he first loved us.

And John goes on to write, "If anyone says, 'I love God, but hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: whoever loves God must also love his brother.'"

John is making the simple point of logic. It is far easier to love a visible person than an invisible God. If you fail in what is easier, loving someone who is right in front of you, how can you do what is harder – love an invisible God? Or to spin it in a slightly different way, how can you say you love the invisible God, when you hate his image that is standing right in front of you? People are created in the image of God. Your brother, your sister, this other Christian in the church, are created in the image of God. You don't like them. You want nothing to do with them. Yet, you say you love God, when this is the picture of God, the model of God, the image of God in front of you?

C.S. Lewis, a Christian writer, was reflecting on the teaching that we are all made in the image of God and are eternal creatures. Here is what Lewis said, "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses. To remember that the dulllest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature who which if you saw it now you would be strongly tempted to worship or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people because people are made in the image of God." Because there are no merely ordinary people, because we are

seeing something of the invisible God whenever we look into the eyes of another human being. Every single person that we meet deserves to be treated with respect.

We say I love you when we do the little things well for each other. Last week I mentioned the book Say Please, Say Thank You. Let me call it to your attention today. Love is often as simple as just showing good manners to each other. How do we escape Sheila-ism and Richie-ism and your name-ism? When we treat one another with those little courtesies that are fitting to the image of God in one another.

Like what? Like training ourselves to not show up late for appointments, as if our time was more valuable than other people's time. We are dealing with the image of God over here. Would we make God stand, cooling his heels, while we made one last phone call or wrote one last email?

How do we say I love you? By doing little acts of courtesy and acts of respect. So in a church service, if your child is acting up, instead of the self-centered perspective "well everyone loves my child as much as I do" or "let them just deal with it", if your child is throwing things or kicking the back of someone's chair or screaming or fussing, better that you take the 15 seconds and disturb people's concentration by picking up your child and walking out, even if you missed the message or worship, than that 50 people around you find it difficult to hear or participate.

You show other people that they are valuable to you by protecting their property. By returning their books, CDs, clothes and cars. By paying them back what you owe them.

We love by the little courtesies. Like responding to invitations in a timely way. Not just throwing them in the mail pile. Because we are saying you are valuable and worth a stamp and 15 seconds of my time to check a box.

You say I love you when you get someone else a cup of coffee. When you hold the door for them. When you give them your parking space. When you don't cut someone off in traffic. Golda was right when she said to her husband, Tevye, in Fiddler on the Roof. I have said I love you a thousand ways by giving you children, by making your meals, by cleaning your clothes and making the Sabbath. By my commitment to you, by my constancy and faithfulness, I have told you that I love you. Let's pray.