



Life Together

1 John 4:7-21

Speaker: Dr. Scott Dudley

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Great to see all of you. Thank you for being here. Those of you who are here in the room, those of you who are joining us online, statistically, the Sunday after Easter is one of the least attended Sundays, so you get extra bonus points. Extra good for being here on Sunday, so thank you.

Just before I preach, you know, one of our core values here is transparency. So just before I preach, kind of want to update you on the e-mail I sent out midweek, letting you know that we had been the victim of a cyber incident. I just want, in transparency's sake, want to update you on that.

Some members of our church noticed that when they hit two of our give links on our website, it redirected them to a fraudulent PayPal account instead of our secure giving partner PushPay. So here's what we did. We disabled the links. We took steps to secure the website. We contacted computer forensics experts, law enforcement, our giving partner PushPay, as well as the fraudulent account PayPal.

So we have, as of now, we have no evidence of any compromise of sensitive data, so that's good. We have no indication that any of our other systems or apps were effective, but we're taking steps just in abundance of caution to double down on security with those. It didn't affect recurring giving or wire transfers or any of the other ways people give. And the good news is, as of now, we haven't discovered anyone who was actually affected by it, so that's the good news.

And I want to reassure you, we've got experts on this. Our website is secure. Pushpay, our partner, their website is secure. And we're reviewing all our security procedures to make sure we're as ironclad as we can be. If you got questions, our finance people will be out there in the lobby after the service. You can ask them as well.

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I also want to say thank you. Like, you guys have been awesome. We sent out the email. So many of you have offered your time, your expertise, your connections. Yet, one more example of how you are an awesome congregation. So, thank you. Even in something like this, seeing God, God works. So, thank you. If you've got questions, folks out in the lobby, ready to help you. All right, enough of that. That's over. The sermon. So, I want to start, I want to start the sermon with two facts, and then I have a question.

Fact one. In early US history, there are many examples of Europeans going to live with Native Americans, and when they did, they almost never returned. However, when Native Americans voluntarily lived with Europeans, they almost always went back to their communities.

Fact two. Second fact. There's a famous study that found that rates of depression in London went down during the Blitz, where Nazis bombed London every night for eight months. Rates of depression went down. Here's the question. What do those two things have in common?

And let's do this the way I used to do it when I was a professor. I'm just going to call on one of you to stand up and... Should be okay, right? Some of you are like, ah! And others of you are like, give me the mic, give me the mic. We especially will not give the mic to you.

What those two things have in common is community. Europeans love the close community they experience in Native American communities, but Native Americans found European individualism off-putting. And in the Blitz, depression went down in spite of the bombings because of the community people experienced in the bomb shelters every night, sharing meals and sharing stories and all of that.

That's how wired we are for relationships. It's how we survived as a species. We are slower, we are weaker than most other animals, which usually spells being lunch for your local tiger, but aided by language and culture, we are able to work together better than any other species.

It's also how God designed us for relationship. In the first chapter of the Bible, in Genesis, it says this, God said, let us make humankind in our image. Us, our, plural. Because God is not singular. God, according to scripture, is triune. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in close relationship with each other, and yet still one God. That's what God is. God is a relationship. God is a community. That's what God is. And we are made in God's image, which means we were made for relationships.

So we're starting a new sermon series today called *Life Together* about how we can have life-giving relationships with spouses, parents, kids, coworkers, neighbors, extended family, as well as how do we be a community here together as a church.

And some of you right now might be thinking, oh, I don't want relationships with anyone. I don't want to be a community with anyone. I don't want to be a community with anyone here. I just want to go to church here.

But we need community. We are made for relationships. Even introverts need and want relationships. And community benefits everyone, and the lack of it hurts everyone.

And the great enemy of relationships is individualism. Now, Western individualism has some great things about it. You know, individual rights, the value of the individual, really great things. But like everything else, it has good things, and it has some downsides, especially since the end of World War II, where our sense of individualism in our country has been in overdrive.

There's a well-known book called *Bowling Alone* that charts the decline of relationships and community in the US. So, joining anything, Kiwanis Club, Rotary Club, church attendance, way, way down, bowling leagues that used to be everywhere, non-existent, charitable giving and volunteering anywhere, way, way down. It's like we're losing the things that connect us to others.

And that book was written before COVID. And it's only gotten worse since, with devastating consequences. Lack of community is worse for our health than smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Rates of anxiety and depression are going through the roof because the byproduct of our hyper individualism is loneliness.

And loneliness has an evil twin called tribalism, which is on the rise around the world right now. And I wanted to find that word. Tribalism doesn't mean living in tribes. Tribalism means aggressively exalting our own ethnic or political group above everything else. And people are drawn to it because they're lonely. But it's fake community. It's bad community.

Biblical community, real community, is about mutual love. Tribalism is banning together around our mutual hates. Community is about what we're for. Tribalism is about what, and usually who, we're against. In biblical community, we celebrate the fact that we're different. Tribalism is a zero-sum game where everything is killed or be killed, and it's wrecking our culture. And left unchecked, tribalism always leads to civil war and or genocide.

But as in all things, Jesus has a better way, and it's called community. And the Bible has a lot to say about how we have strong, healthy, life-giving relationships with friends, family members, coworkers, and each other as a church. And we see that in today's text, from 1 John, chapter 4. And it says this:

"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. Not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 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. God is love. And we love because he first loved us."

Now, it's easy in a passage like this to jump straight to the command part, right? Get out there, go love other people, you're Christians, go be loving to people. But God never asks anything of us that he doesn't first put in us. He's not going to ask us to love others unless we first experience his love for ourselves.

And we need to define that word *love* because in our culture, it's all messed up. In our culture, love is this sort of feeling kind of a thing, but in the Bible, love is more than just a feeling, right? And in the original Greek, the New Testament is written in Greek, and in the Greek language, there are a bunch of different words for love. There was *philia*, which is the friendship kind of love. That's the "if" kind of love. If you are nice to me, if we have shared interests, I'll love you. And then there was *eros*, which is erotic love. That's the "because" kind of love. Because I find you attractive, because you're good looking, I love you. And then there was *agape*, which was the highest form of love. It's the "in spite of" kind of love, the unconditional love. In spite of your flaws, in spite of your failures, I choose to love you.

And in the Bible, love is more than a feeling. In the Bible, love is a commitment, not always a word that we like. Love is a commitment to seek the best for the other, even at our own cost. And that's how God loves us.

The text starts out, "dear friends." And in the original Greek, there's a wordplay there: *agapatoi*, *agapomene*—both variants of the word *agape*, the highest form of love. Roughly translated, it's this: you who are loved, now go love. That is, our love is a response to being loved by God. You who are loved, go love. For love comes from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

One of the marks of being a follower of Jesus is that we have experienced his love for us in a way that makes us more loving than we used to be before. And we talked about this all fall in our sermon series. And again, the emphasis of this passage isn't go, try harder, do more, love better. It says we first have to know God. And in the Bible, the word *know* never means just intellectual knowledge; it means experiential knowledge. Love is more than a feeling, but it also does involve feeling God's love for you.

Which for me, especially when I was younger, was a bit of a problem. Because I was really good at loving God with my mind, but it was a little harder with my heart, because I wasn't quite as in touch with my heart when I was younger.

As part of my preparation to become a pastor, I worked for a summer in a hospital as a chaplain. In the afternoons, I would visit with patients. But the mornings were spent in this kind of group therapy session with other chaplains to help us process what we were experiencing. I hated it. Hated it.

Halfway through the summer, one of the people in the group said, "Scott, you're the only one in our group who hasn't cried yet." And then the leader of the group said, "Yeah, Scott, you haven't cried yet. How do you feel about that? Why aren't you crying? What's going wrong? What's going on inside? Let's talk. How about your mother? Let's talk about your mother." Because if it's not one thing, it's your mother, right? Something went terribly wrong with you, Scott.

For the whole summer, the rest of the summer, they all tried to get me to cry. I didn't crack. No, not once. Because, see, I grew up in Eastern Washington, where we don't have emotions over there. They're illegal in Eastern Washington. And we certainly never cry over in Eastern Washington—except for very moving, special occasions, like when our favorite tractor wins the tractor pull. Chokes me up every time. Or when country music is playing—then you can cry.

But this is a place where Jesus has changed me over the years, opened up my heart more, so that I can experience his love, not just in my mind, but in my heart as well. He's grown that capacity in me.

The text goes on, and it says, "God is love." I cannot overemphasize what a revolution that one sentence is. Because in other religions and other human philosophies, none of those others say that God is love. God is holy, God is to be obeyed, God is angry—but it's only the God who comes to us in Jesus where we find that God is love.

Now notice, it doesn't say that love is God, which is kind of what our culture says, and it doesn't say God is loving. That's an action or a personality trait. No, it says that what God *is*, is love. And that's because what God is, is a relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And then the text says, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear." So as Christians, our greatest characteristic isn't fear—it's love. But when I look at how Christians in our country are behaving sometimes, and what I see, I just see so much fear. Fear, fear, fear, fear, fear in Christians. And then when we're afraid, we very quickly convert that into anger. And so it's fear, fear, fear, and anger, anger, anger, anger. But a mark of a follower of Jesus is not outrage. It's love. It's love.

The text goes on: "We love because he first loved us. Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister." So again, the commandment to love comes after we have first been loved by God. God makes the first move. He comes himself in the person of Jesus basically to woo us, basically to win our hearts and win us over. And our love then is meant to be a response of feeling his love.

And God's love for you has a bunch of different qualities. Okay, God's love for you is unconditional and uncancelable. He can't help but love you. He can't help himself. It's like me and cookies. I've shared this with you before. Me and cookies, right? It's either zero or a dozen. One doesn't seem to be an option. Like if I eat one cookie, game

over—I'm going to eat a dozen cookies. I can't help myself. God can't help himself but love you.

And this is important. He doesn't just love you because he's God, and theologically he has to because he loves everyone. He loves you for who you are, in all your particularity, in all the ways that you do that voodoo that you do so well that makes you *you*. God loves you there. He wanted his universe to include a *you*, so he made a *you*.

And his love doesn't depend on how moral you are, doesn't depend on your achievements. He doesn't care what grades you get, what job you have or don't have, and there's nothing you can do to make him stop loving you. No sin you can sin, no rejection of him that you can make, no failure that you can fail. There is nothing, not one blasted thing you can do to stop him from loving you. God loves you, and there's not a darn thing you can do about it—so you might as well just get used to it.

Second, his love for you is sacrificial. This passage says, "This is how God showed his love among us. Not that we loved God, but he loved us, and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." Romans 5 says, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners"—not when we were at our best, not when we were being impressive, but at our worst—"Christ died for us." He loves you so much, he came himself in the person of Jesus. Jesus is God in the flesh, died on a cross to pay the price for your sins and mine. Nobody else loves you like that—nobody.

I remember one time back when I was working on my PhD dissertation—or more accurately, overworking on my dissertation, as in ignoring my wife and friends—so my wife and I had to have a conversation about this. Apparently it was mandatory. And at one point in this conversation, she slammed her hand down on the table, and she says, "That dissertation doesn't love you the way that I do." Good point, dear.

Nobody loves you the way Jesus loves you. Not your mother or your father, not your friends, your GPA, your SAT scores, your performance as an athlete, your job, your reputation. Nobody loves you the way Jesus loves you.

Third, God's love is providing and guiding. He provides for our physical, emotional, spiritual needs, and he guides us through life to make those decisions that will help us become who he created us to be.

Fourth, God's love is discipline and growth. God loves you just the way you are and not as you should be, but he also loves you enough not to leave you the way he found you. So from time to time, as any good parent will do, he disciplines us so that we can grow and become everything he created us to be.

And then finally, God's love for you is relational. It's not transactional. And this is where we can get kind of messed up, right? Often we view God as kind of a vending machine: I put in my prayers and I show up at church, and out pops my perfect, victorious life, right? And God's job is to keep bad things from happening to me and help me achieve my life

plan. That's not a relationship. That's a transaction. And yes, God does help us, but it's more than that. Jesus, who is God, is not asking for you to join a religion. He's not asking you to give intellectual assent to a bunch of truth propositions. He wants a relationship with you.

And the more we experience God's unconditional, uncancellable, sacrificial, providing, guiding, growing, relational love, we become more loving to others, which then shows God to the world. The text says, no one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. In other words, when we love others, it makes God visible to the world.

And that's one of the reasons community is so important, because it's evangelism. It's how people who don't know Jesus see Jesus by how we love. And if there is anything our country needs right now from Christians, it is to see the loving face of Jesus instead of our anger and our fears. Nobody has argued into being a follower of Jesus. They are loved there.

And in the weeks ahead, we're going to talk more about how we love well and how we have life-giving relationships with friends, family, co-workers, spouses, each other as a community. But for this week, for this week, before we get to all that stuff, for this week, let's just focus on experiencing God's love.

Because it can be hard to do, right? In part because we can't see God, but also because we haven't been loved perfectly ourselves in our life, right? I mean, from the time we're kids, we get these messages that we're not lovable, right? Or that we have to earn love and approval through achievement. Whether it's parents who shamed us, peers who rejected us, spouses who betrayed us, we get these messages that we're not lovable, and so it makes it hard to experience God's love. So then how do we experience it? Well, try these things. Try one or all of these things this week.

First, this week, read the Bible personally. This is a story about how much God loves you. So read it and substitute your name wherever you can put your name. So famous verse, John 3:16, "For God so loved the world," instead put your name. "For God so loved Scott, for God so loved me, that if I follow Jesus, I will have eternal life." When you personalize it, it helps us to feel God's love more.

Second thing you could try is listening prayer. Just ask Jesus, "How much do you love me, Jesus?" And then pay attention to those thoughts, pictures, memories, scripture verses, song lyrics that may pop into your mind, that may be Jesus saying something to you.

Third, look back. You know, one of the ways I experience God's love the most is to look back at the ways that he's cared for me in the past. When has God met you in a hard time? When have you seen God bring good out of bad things? When have you experienced God's presence? Remembering those things helps me feel loved by God. And if you don't know Jesus, if you haven't had any of those experiences with Jesus,

please talk to one of us after the service, because we would love to help you know Jesus and experience his love.

And then fourth, put your heart into worship. When you come, when we're worshipping, engage not just with your mind, but with your heart. Or don't just kind of stand there and wait for the music to be over to get to the sermon or something like that. Like engage it with your heart.

I have a friend who's Swedish, and he jokes about how emotionally repressed he is because of his culture and his upbringing. And he says, "You'll know when I'm really excited about something, because that's when I say, 'You betcha.'" And then he says, "Once in a blue moon, I lose all control, and I say, 'Yasher, you betcha.'" Okay, don't be that way in worship. Like engage it with your heart, right? That's why we have music, because it gets to our emotions, okay? Put your heart into worship. And all God's people said, "Yasher, you betcha," right?

The more we experience God's love, the more we love others. I have a friend who has three kids, and when they were growing up, there was this one of his kids who he could just not get through to. She fought with him all the time, showed him no affection, pretended not to like him, just rejected him, rejected him, rejected him, which hurt his feelings and made him angry. And one night, they were just going at it, like just right before she was supposed to be in bed, right? They were just going at it, gotten this big fight, and he got so hurt and so angry, he walked out of her room, and he thought to himself, that's it. I'm done. I have two other children. You're your mother's child from now on. Parents, have you ever been there?

And then he had one of those thoughts, that he knew wasn't his, that it was Jesus who said to him, "You're my son, and I've never given up on you, and if you quit now, you'll regret it for life." So he let that sink in for a minute, and then in that moment, feeling loved by Jesus, he went back, he hugged his daughter, they prayed together, and then from there, he started to really concentrate on a better relationship with her, spend even more time with her, take even more of an interest in the things that interested her, and gradually over the years, the relationship improved, and now they've got this awesome relationship.

God reminded him, "You're my son, and I've never given up on you," and then when he experienced God's love for him like that, he was better able to love his daughter. Because whether it's loving our parents or children or friends or coworkers or Uncle Fred whose politics you can't stand, or loving each other as a church, we love more the more we experience God's love for us—his never-ending, always-believing, unconditional, sacrificial, not one dad-gum thing you can do to stop it, never giving up on you, love for you.

If you take nothing home from this sermon, take this home: God loves you. No, no, not just theologically, not just something you hear in church. He really, really loves you. Experience that, and it changes your life.

Thank you that you love us. Thank you that you love us, Jesus. Even at our worst, you love us. Thank you that you love us in all our particularity. This week, God, help that to not just be a theology for us. Every person here, help that not just be a theology for us or something we hear in church, but a lived experience.

We cannot make that happen on our own. So Holy Spirit, help us experience your love for us so that we can show your love to the world. And pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What does this passage tell us about the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
- What does this passage tell us about love? How is it similar to our culture's understanding of love? How is it different?
- If we want to get better at loving others, how does this passage say we should go about it?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What is one way that God has reminded you of his love for you recently?
- How do you want to love others sacrificially this week (school, work, home, neighborhood, family, other)?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.