

Since it's February, the month of love, we're talking about love again. We're going to think about what the apostle John wrote in I John 4:19, where he says, We love, because He first loved us. John talks a lot about love, in his gospel, and in his letters. Especially, love among believers. That was one of the themes of Jesus' teaching that John especially picked up on. For Jesus, and for John, love for the neighbour is the proof that someone is a real follower of Jesus Christ. In fact, we can even say that for them it's the only proof that someone is a follower of Christ.

Of course, that doesn't mean that it doesn't matter what we believe, or whether we believe everything that God says in the Bible. We don't have to choose between those things. They belong together; they're two sides of the same coin. That's what Jesus said in John 13: By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. People who really believe in Jesus Christ will love each other. That's the promise of the gospel. When you believe in Jesus Christ, you're grafted into Him, like a branch is grafted into a vine, and the life of the vine flows into the branch. If you believe in Jesus Christ, you're a branch of the true Vine, and His life is in you. And the way that you can see the life of Jesus in believers is that they love their neighbour. They care about their neighbour, and they show it by making sacrifices to help their neighbours.

This is what John is saying in the text that we're focussing on this evening: We love because He first loved us. John isn't talking about romantic love here. When he wrote these words, he was talking to a congregation, and he's talking about the love that all Christians have for each other. These words explain where the life and the fellowship of the church come. They explain why the church exists, and what it is. But exactly because John is talking about the church, because John is talking about the life and the character of the church, these words apply to all of our relationships, including our marriages, and friendships, and families.

The love that John is talking about is something that the world knows nothing about. Something that only exists among believers. I'm not saying only Christians love each other. It might seem like it's rare today, but there are husbands and wives and friends and parents and children out there who love each other.

But no one loves anyone out there the way God loves us. Last week we heard about what John wrote in chapter 3 of this letter: By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us. John is saying, That's where we found out what love really is. When Jesus Christ, the Son of God, laid down His life for us. He says the same thing, a little differently here in chapter 4, in verse 10: 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.

John says, this is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. Can you imagine that?, he says. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, laid down His life, for us! For people like you and me. Paul was amazed that Christ would do that. He says in Romans 5, While we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – although perhaps for a good person one would even dare to die – but God shows His love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Maybe there are people worth dying for. And maybe there are people who would actually die for someone else. Soldiers and policemen and firemen put their lives on the line for the sake of other people. So there are times and situations where people die for others. But who would die for us, if they knew us? And who

would die for their enemies? That's what Paul means when he calls us, sinners. He doesn't just mean that we're people who do bad things. He means that we're God's enemies. We're inclined by nature to hate God. And He sent Christ to die for us!

That's love. It gives itself away, it lays down its life, it sacrifices everything, for the other. It has only one aim and one purpose: to do at any cost what is good, what will help the other. Even when the other person is absolutely unworthy of such love, of such a sacrifice.

That's the love that believers have for each other. John says, We love each other, because God loved us first. When John says this, We love because He first loved us, he's not just saying, Our love for each is our response to God's love for us. He's not just saying, We're so thankful for God's love that we decided that we should love each other, or, We know that we should love each other, or, God set such a great example in the way He loved us, and we're following His example.

There's nothing wrong with saying any of those things. Given the way God has loved us, we absolutely should love each other. That should be our natural response. And we definitely should follow the example that God has set. John says those kinds of things in other places in this letter. But that's not what he's saying here. Here, John is saying something much more wonderful than that.

He's saying God's love for us has produced this love in us. This is the fruit, this is the result of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. This is what His love has done to us.

And that means, We love each other as believers in Jesus Christ. We love each other because we're connected to Jesus Christ by faith, and He lives in us. John wrote in his first gospel, To all who received Him, Who believed in His Name, He gave the right to become the children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And here's he's saying, We love each other because we were born of God. Born of God means, He brought us to life in Jesus Christ. Our life comes from Him. It's the same between us and God as it is between children and their fathers: their fathers have passed on their life to their children. The father's blood flows in the veins of the children, so to speak. And you can see the character, and the appearance, of the father, in the children.

John is saying, That's where our love for each other comes from. And that's the kind of love it is. It's not human love; it didn't originate in our hearts or in our minds. The love that we have for each is the same as the love that God has for us. Our love has the same DNA as God's love, you might say. It's not just that we like spending time together because we enjoy each other's company; it's not just because our personalities are so well-matched, or because we have so much in common. It's not just that we're attracted to each other.

Our love comes from heaven itself. In verse 9 of this chapter, John wrote, 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. And that's the kind of love that we have for each other: the kind of love that God showed, when He sent His Son to die for His enemies. Last week we listened to the words that John wrote in chapter 3 of this letter: By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us. That's the kind of love we have for each other: the kind of love that Christ showed, when He laid down His life for us.

God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. John's talking about eternal life. When we hear that expression, eternal life, we think about going to heaven when we die, and living in the new heaven and the new earth when Jesus comes again. But eternal life isn't just what we're going to get, what we're going to have, then, sometime in the future. Jesus said in John 5, Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears My Word and believes Him Who sent Me has eternal life. He has passed from death to life.

What is that, eternal life? What's it like? What does it look like when a person has eternal life look like? How can you tell that someone has eternal life? The essence, the heartbeat, of eternal life is love. That's the life of heaven. That's the heartbeat of the life that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit have with each other. And when you were born of God, then that's the life He gave you, in Jesus Christ. So when you say, We love because He first loved us, you're saying, We're living the life of heaven here on earth. People talk about having a marriage that was made in heaven. Believers have a life together that is made in heaven.

That doesn't mean that we're perfect. We wish we were! Our life together as believers isn't always easy. It's not like one of those fairy tales, where everyone lives happily ever after. Sad to say, but believers still sin against each other. The Bible says that believers have enemies: the devil and the world and our own flesh. And they hate the idea that God shares His life with us, that God makes us love each other the way He loved us. So in one way and another, especially by tempting us to look out for ourselves, and to ignore each other's needs, by tempting us to put ourselves first, our enemies are working hard to undermine the fellowship that we have with each other as believers in Jesus Christ. And it shows. We have to admit that there is a lot to be ashamed of in the way we treat each other sometimes.

But we have the promise of the gospel. We love, because He first loved us. By grace, through faith, we share in the life of Jesus Christ; we share in the life of God, and so, we will love each other. And others will see that. John says, No one has ever seen God. But, if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. In other words, people will be able to see what God is like, when believers love each other. Pray that the love of God will fill us, and that others will come to know Him, because we love each other.

Thank you for listening – until next week..