

Communion

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] I just want to be loved is the silent or sometimes not so silent cry of many. I just want to be loved. And this longing to be loved, I think, is born of two fundamental realities about us as human beings, as men and women. The first fundamental reality that finds expression in this longing to be loved is that we were created by God to be loved. This longing for love is in the very DNA of our being. It's essential to our humanity, this longing to be loved.

Another reality that evidences itself in this cry, be it spoken or unspoken, I just want to be loved, is the reality that love is often in scarce supply. So, it's something that we long for, it's something that we need, but often the supply of it is not what it might be.

I was just reflecting on this theme, I suppose, in this past week and was struck by something that Theresa May, the Prime Minister, was speaking about in the course of the week. I think it was in the she was announcing measures to tackle the growing issue of isolation in our country. And the research that has been done upon which the government has decided to act, I'm not sure exactly what it plans to do, but nonetheless the concern to do something is grounded in research that suggests that nine million people, roughly, always or often feel lonely. And that expression I'm just quoting verbatim from the reports, nine million people in our country always or often feel lonely. So, that's what? What's the population of the UK? Sixty million or so? That's, you know, fifteen percent, one in six people, that's a lot of people. And what is loneliness if we're going to make the connection with love? What is loneliness if not the absence or certainly scarcity of love or loving relationships that we are part of? In the absence of these loving relationships or perhaps in some cases those that do exist, they're very scarce or do exist, they're very scarce or they're very distant, then you have this reality that even the government is looking to address. It'll be interesting to see how they propose addressing the issue. Well, watch this space. The Bible has a lot to say about love, and today I want to consider two complementary definitions of love provided by God through John in his letters.

It's interesting that John in the letters that he writes, three very short letters right at the end of the Bible, on two occasions in two of the letters, he begins a sentence with the words, this is love. Now, we've read the first one already in 1 John chapter 4, this is love, not that we love God, but that He loved us, and so on. So, on that occasion, he begins the sentence with these words, this is love. But he does that on a second occasion also. He does that in 2 John chapter 1 and verse 6, just have to turn over one page. If you do have your Bible open there in 1 John, if you just turn over one page, then you find again the same introduction to a statement in verse 6 of 2 John, and this is love.

And he goes on to give a definition of love. Now, the interesting thing is that when you draw the two together, though they're different definitions, we can see how they complement each other. On the first occasion, in 1 John chapter 4, we are provided with a definition that draws our attention to and admiration for the love of God towards us, how God has loved us, the manner in which His love has found expression. His love towards us is the focus of the first definition, this is love. And then John goes on.

[5 : 1 0] On the second occasion, introducing a statement with exactly the same words, this is love, the focus is on our response to God's love. So, on the second occasion, it's this is love that we walk in obedience to His commands. As you have heard from the beginning, His command is that you walk in love.

And it's very clear that this call that is being directed to us is on the grounds of the fact that we have been loved by God, and consequently, this is how we are to respond to that. So, two definitions, different definitions, but complementary definitions of this great word, this great theme of love. This is love. And what I'm going to do today is in the morning, I'm going to give some time thinking about the first of these definitions, and then this evening spend a little time thinking about the second.

And so, in a way, they come together, they complement each other, but each is a definition that we can draw something from in isolation from the other one. So, let's spend a little time this morning considering the first definition. And we can do so by posing and trying to answer three very simple questions to what John says there in verse 10 of 1 John 4. The first question we're going to pose is, who loved us? References made to the fact that we're loved. And I simply want to spend a little time identifying who it is who loves us. But then we'll ask a second question. We'll ask the question, how did the one who loved us love us? In what way was that love demonstrated? And then thirdly, we'll ask another simple question, and that is, why did He love us? And there the question is in the sense of, with what purpose in view, with what end in mind? Not so much the motivation, because that question, why, might think or might suggest we're thinking about motivation.

But on this occasion, the why did He love us is more in the sense of, with a view to what? With a view to what end result, if you wish. So, these are the three questions, and let's just think of each of them briefly. First of all, who loved us? The very fact that we pose that question, or need to pose that question in considering our text, reminds us that love doesn't exist in the absence of a relationship.

John doesn't give us some philosophical definition, but states that love is being loved. He defines love by stating that we are loved. This is love, not that we love God, but that He loved us.

[8 : 16] So, you have these words that introduce a definition. This is love. And then what does He do? He declares that this love that He's talking about is experienced, indeed can only be experienced in the context of a relationship, of being loved, but in turn, of course, responding to that love.

Now, you know the t-shirts or the mugs, and there's all kinds of ways in which the sentence is finished, but you know, love is, and then you have any number of possibilities, depending on what message is being and put across. Well, for John, the way he would answer that question is, love is being loved.

Who loved us? Well, the verse says that He loved us. This is love. Not that we love God, but that He loved us. And of course, it's very clear who He is. God. God loved us. The creator of the universe, the only living and true God, the God who has revealed Himself in history, and most wonderfully, in the person of His Son, in the person of Jesus, the eternal Son of God. He is the one who loved us.

God loved us. And this love of God for His people is a consequence of and reflection of who God is.

God is love. God is love. Love is essential to the very nature of God. And as God is love, God is eternal. So love is eternal. And we can only begin to understand the eternal love of God when we understand that God is community. We've already stated that on the basis of what John is saying, love doesn't exist in the absence of relationship. And of course, when we think about, well, where does that place God before He created us? Well, what it does is it reminds us that God is community, a community of love. The Trinity is a community of eternal love. The Father has eternally loved the Son, and the Son has eternally loved the Father. The Spirit has eternally loved and been loved by the Father and Son. So, throughout eternity, love has existed in the context of the relationships within the persons of the Godhead, the persons of the Trinity. That love is essential to God's very nature. It isn't just a theological curiosity that we can ponder on and try and reflect on. It has huge practical significance and value to you and me. Because this truth that love is essential to God grants us great security.

[11 : 38] God cannot stop loving. If He were to stop loving, He would stop being God. God is love.

I don't know where you are this morning. You know, we've spoken or we've thrown out that statistic about so many people afflicted with loneliness and isolation. I don't know. That may be your circumstance. Or even if that's not something that you would say is where you are. You do relate to this thirst for love that is deep and genuine and secure and reliable. Maybe you've been disappointed in love.

Maybe those you thought loved you have let you down. Maybe love has grown cold. And for whatever reasons, you can relate to this longing, this thirst for love, well, I would invite you, I would urge you to come and drink at a fountain that will indeed, that can never run dry. We're talking about the love of God.

God is love. Even using that language, and sometimes we need to use language that we can somehow relate to, but even the language of a fountain is misleading as it suggests a supply of love that God disburses or shares out as He sees fit. But God doesn't possess a supply or a stash of love. Love isn't a resource apart from God but available to God but available to God. No, God is love. And so, there's no possibility, no prospect of that love running dry, for God is love. Who loved us? God loved us. The text also speaks of the direction of love. This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us. It is God's love.

God who has taken the initiative in establishing a relationship of love with us. He made the first move in creating us with the purpose of loving us. And in this loving initiative, there is a perfect harmony within the persons of the Trinity, each person shading the same purpose and motivated by the same love.

[14 : 10] who loved us. But John also goes on in these few words in verse 10 to answer the question, how did God love us? And I want to move on to that question. How did God love us? How did God demonstrate His love for us? Well, He did so by a concrete act of love on our behalf. We could maybe identify many acts of love on our behalf. The very fact that He created a universe in which we could live and be provided for is a demonstration of love. But John hones in on and focuses in on one particular act of love that demonstrates God's love for us most eloquently and most powerfully. But before we look at and consider this act of love, we need to be clear that God's love for us did not begin at the point of God acting on our behalf. God did not begin to love us when He acted in the way that John is about to mention, but rather He demonstrated His love in this way. Indeed, in verse 9, that's also made very clear.

This is how God showed His love among us. He sent His one and only Son into the world. It doesn't say that's when He began loving us. That's when He showed His love. That's when He demonstrated His love for us. Of course, that's the same idea in verse 10. This is love not that we love God, but that He loved us and sent His Son. So, because He loved us, because of this pre-existing love for us, He demonstrated, He shows it in a particular way. But as we think about this love, God's love in action, we are able to appreciate the character and splendor of God's love. As we think about this particular demonstration of love, this particular demonstration of love. And so, that's the question, well, what is this demonstration? How did God love us? What did He do to show His love for us? Well, verse 10 gives us the clear answer. This is love, not that we love God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. In this way, preeminently and powerfully, God demonstrated His love for us. He sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Well, let's consider this expression of

God's love and look at what it says, and maybe look at it in reverse order in terms of the words that we have in that statement. The statement speaks about, or acknowledges and speaks about, our sins. Now, this may seem a strange place to start, but it's only as we appreciate the problem of our sin that we can appreciate the magnitude of God's love in dealing with our sin. Our sin, your sin, your rebellion, our rebellion has distanced us from God. Our sin, and it's important to focus on that possessive pronoun, our sin. We need to take possession of our sin. We need to acknowledge our sin. He sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. We are the authors of our sin. We are responsible for our sin, and that sin has distanced us from God. It's something that not only produces sadness in the heart of God, but it also provokes in God a righteous and holy anger towards sin.

The same God who is love is holy and just, and His holiness and His justice require that sin receive the due punishment. And the Bible tells us what that due punishment is. The wages of sin is death.

So, what is God to do? The God who, in respect of His justice and holiness, must ensure that sin is punished. And yet, the God who loves us and who wants to forgive us, wants to spare us from the consequences of our sin. What can He do? How can He reconcile these seemingly competing demands?

[18 : 53] Well, He did so in the sending of His Son. In verse 9, it speaks of Jesus as His one and only Son. He sent His one and only Son, His only begotten Son. God acts. In the face of this great problem of our sin, God acts.

God, the Father sends His Son on a rescue mission. But what does this rescue mission involve? How is it going to work? How is He going to solve this problem of our sin? Well, we're told there that He is sent as an atoning sacrifice for our sin. Jesus is sent to die as a sacrifice. He is sent to die for us, in our place, in our place, in our place, in our place. The text says that Jesus died as a sacrifice.

Now, how are we to understand that language? What kind of sacrifice? Well, in the verse that we've read, the sacrifice is described, or there's an adjective to give greater clarity as to what kind of sacrifice is described as an atoning sacrifice. Well, what does that mean? How does that shed any further light?

It's one Greek word that is translated in the verse that we've read there by these two English words, atoning sacrifice. It's a Greek word that on other occasions in other versions of the Bible is translated with the word propitiation. Without getting into all the details and the richness of that word, the basic idea is of a sin offering that's purpose is to pay the price for sins committed, and so remove sin as a barrier to a relationship and friendship with God. The atoning sacrifice that Jesus offers serves two related and connected purposes. The primary purpose is to remove our sin, and our sin, and our sin is removed by Jesus receiving the just punishment for our sin. He receives our punishment and in that way deals with sin, removes that sin from our account, condemning us. Jesus bears our burden and pays the price of our sin. Just to think a little bit more about that, just this week I've been in Edinburgh for the most part of the week at an in-service training course. And there were a number of sessions covering different subject matters. And in one of the sessions, one of our former ministers,

Alec MacDonald, was speaking, and he was reflecting on a life in ministry and was sharing stories of a lifetime in ministry. And one of the stories that he shared was of an occasion when he went to visit in a psychiatric hospital with Douglas Macmillan, also a former minister of this congregation. So, the story very much is appropriate for Bon Accord. Two of our former ministers were involved. And so, they were visiting this hospital, and they were speaking to a young man in the hospital, and they were having a cup of tea and a biscuit. And Alec and Douglas and the young man were there, and they were engaging in conversation. And Alec was sharing how Douglas picked up a biscuit, I don't know, digestive or whatever it was, that he was eating with his cup of tea. And he was speaking to this young man who knew very little about the gospel. And he said, he put the biscuit on his hand. And if anybody of you knew Douglas, he had big hands. So, anyway, this little biscuit was there in his hand. He says, that biscuit is like your sin. It's weighing you down. It's weighing you down. There's nothing you can do about it. It's weighing you down.

[22 : 59] Do you know what God has done? He's taken the weight of that sin. It's your sin that you're responsible for, and he's passed it on to Jesus. Now, Jesus is carrying it. And Jesus carried it to the cross. And Jesus dealt with it for you. So, you're free of that burden if you trust in Jesus.

Very simple story, not very complex. And yet, in this vivid way, speaking about what this atoning sacrifice is all about. Jesus dying in our place, carrying our burden, bearing the punishment that we are due. Our sin passed over to him, and he bears it for us. So, the primary purpose of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus is to remove sin. But the secondary or consequent purpose or effect is to remove the cause of God's righteous anger against sin and sinners. As sin has been dealt with, there remains no cause for anger. Because of what Jesus has done, God no longer has anything to be angry about in relation to our sin. It's been dealt with. No longer there to provoke just righteous anger. The death of Jesus, then, is born of and demonstrates the magnitude of the love of God for us.

God so loved us that he sent his one and only Son. But at the same time, the death of Jesus opens up the door for us to be able to experience the love of God. It removes the barriers that there were to us entering into a relationship of love and friendship with God, a relationship that we can enjoy as we put our trust in Jesus, in the person of Jesus, and in the work of Jesus on our behalf. How did God love us?

But then, finally, and very briefly, why did he love us? And again, as I mentioned at the beginning, I'm not talking here about the motivation for God loving us. We've already talked a little bit about God's motivation or the impulse of God's love for us. He loves us because he is love. It's in his nature to love. But what I have in mind here is God's purpose or intended outcome in loving us. And we need to be a little bit careful here. God's love for his people is unconditional and eternal and is not conditioned on us fulfilling some determined purpose. God will not stop loving us if we fail or fall short of his purpose for us. That said, there is a purpose that God pursues in loving us. We see that in the following verse, or rather in the preceding verse, in verse 9. 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, that we might live through him. So this goes beyond the idea of us simply being granted new life. It also involves the manner of new life that we are loved to live. And what is at the heart of this new life in him? Well, it is that we are to love one another. Dear friends, verse 11, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

[26 : 45] Remember, the principle distinguishing mark of the Christian in the Bible is not doctrinal or confessional. It's not what catechism you've learned or what truths you believe, important though these things are.

The principle distinguishing mark of the Christian is experimental. It's loving one another. That's what we read in John chapter 13 from the very lips of Jesus. By this shall men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another. Now, we'll think a little bit more about that this evening when we look at the second time that John introduces a statement with the words, this is love, in his second letter. But of course, here on the first occasion, he immediately moves on to talk about the implications of God's love and how we are to respond to his love as we love one another.

I just want to be loved. Jesus has an answer to that longing cry, and his answer is an invitation.

Come to me. Your longing is embraced by my desire to love you. I do love you, and I want to love you. I gave my life as an atoning sacrifice for your sins. Come to me and enjoy forgiveness and new life.

Come and receive, and as you receive, give. This morning, we're going to be gathering around the Lord's table, and as we do, we'll be remembering and giving thanks for and celebrating the love of God, a love so deep and so wide that He gave His one and only Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin.

[28 : 45] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You that You are love. We thank You that love is of Your very essence. We thank You for the many ways and the many occasions in which You have demonstrated who You are and Your nature and character. We thank You very especially for the way in which You have done so in the giving of Your one and only Son. We thank You for this most immeasurable demonstration and evidence of Your love for us, that You are willing to go so far, even to the point of giving Your one and only Son to die for us, to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.