

Sermon Theme: God's Love Leads Our Love
Sermon Reading: 1 John 3:18-24

In 1993 the musician Haddaway released a song asking a question that has been on the minds of many people. That song was, "What is love?" This song, "What is Love?" certainly wasn't the first to ask it or would it be the last to wrestle with and try to grasp that can be elusive concept of love. Deep down we all want it and in some shape or form we want to be able to show it, this love. Some struggle with thoughts of how much they deserve to be loved—some wanting to be given more while others think they deserve little or less. Others have more trouble showing or expressing love. To determine this we then head back to that question, what is love? Is it something that just comes upon us completely enveloping our hearts and minds to the point where you can't fight this feeling anymore? Is it an emotional outburst? Is it in a physical embrace? Is it in the words that are spoken? What is love, how do you show love? Think back to the first time someone (your significant other, a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife, etc.) besides your family, mom, or dad told you, "I love you." Do you remember it? What is it about those words that give us butterflies in our stomachs, makes the heart race and skip a beat? Maybe it comes down to simply knowing that this love is more than just a feeling or saying the words. You expect the person who said it to mean it and show it.

That's what John is telling us in the reading from 1 John 3. Anyone can say those words, "I love you," but you, John says, dear children, people of God, "*Let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*" Don't just say the words because it's something that someone wants to hear. Don't just go through the motions. Actually mean it. Love with how you act, treat others, and in truth. Let what you say with your mouth and do with your hands be and show what is in your heart.

We don't really need to get into how we have experienced the opposite of this. We all know what it's like to feel a lack of love or little love. We know how hurtful that is to feel like or be told that someone doesn't love you. It makes you feel like garbage, it's miserable—no one wants to feel unloved or unlovable. But we probably can remember other times when we've been the guilty party treating others just like that too.

Then there are the times when we haven't always shown the best love either. He might recognize they should call someone more often. She might see she needs to

send more letters and stay better in touch. She might come to the realization she should visit them. He comes to the conclusion that he needs to take more time out of his day for this person, be more patient and understanding, and willingly spend more time with them. Not all, but most—even someone who is in denial of the wrongs they have done—will probably admit there is room for improvement with how they show or share love with others.

You know as well as I do how quickly we might admit to this as well. But as we do with so much else, we know we need to do better and then leave it at that. All too easily we know the right words to say, but then stop with just words. We recognize the truth. We want to love in more than just words. We do! We know words have meaning and expect action—but then it seems to stop. So it might make you a little uncomfortable when John says in v.19, *“This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest.”* Want to be at ease and have peace of mind? Want to have proof you belong to the truth, that is you belong to Jesus? Look to how you act. How you treat others. Look at the motivation and attitude at the core. Look at how you love.

That might be scary especially when we look into the mirror of God’s Law and see that it’s not a pleasant sight. You know how you have not loved God with your whole heart. All too often that love instead shows to be in misplaced priorities and selfish gains. Instead of serving God, you look to serve yourself. Instead of loving our neighbors as ourselves, we love them only as much as they love us. If someone treats us poorly, too easily do we jump to the conclusion that we have every right to treat them poorly. Instead of simply loving, we do so in order to get love in return, be recognized for what you’ve done, be rewarded in some shape or form. We do not love those who hate us. We withhold care for those who have hurt us. One may try and make themselves feel better by wondering, “How am I supposed to love with my whole heart, love my neighbor as myself, and also take care of myself? There’s not enough to go around. I do my best.”

That mirror of God’s Law shows the ugliness of sin and not following God’s command to love. Sin separates us from love—love for each other and most importantly sin separates us from the love of God. It ruins our relationships with others and keeps us from having a relationship with God. Instead of hearts that are at rest and filled with confidence, seeing how we love maybe leads more to anxiety and hearts filled with unrest. All too easily seeing how poorly I love others can lead to despair.

Hear again what John says in verse 20-23, *“If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God²² and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. ²³ And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.”* John knows how you might respond when looking at your heart. He knows how God’s Law shows loveless hearts and hearts stained with ulterior motives and selfish ambition. But God is greater than our hearts. Be reassured that before the perfect judge God, he is a more reliable judge than your heart. He gives you the definite assurance that all your shortcomings are made up through the perfect love of your Savior given and credited to you through faith.

Because Jesus wanted to have a relationship with you and be connected to you he came and perfectly loved God and his neighbor in your place. Because he wanted you to have his love and to be loved by God, he died on the cross to make up for your lack of love. The guiltless Jesus was declared guilty of all sin, so that you would have peace with God and confidence before him. Because of his perfect life and innocent death, God accepted Jesus’ payment on the cross and raised him to life at Easter. And now God, in light of Jesus’ accomplishment, declares you to be not guilty of sin. He sees Jesus’ perfection as your perfection; Jesus keeping God’s commands as you keeping God’s commands; Jesus’ perfect love as your love. The love God has for his one and only Son he gives to you who is made his son, his daughter.

God is greater than your heart. He doesn’t take your opinion into account. He doesn’t listen to the accusations from the world, from Satan, even from you. He knows everything. He knows what Jesus accomplished for you. He knows that it is yours through faith. He knows what he has declared you to be: not guilty of sin; not lacking love. He is greater than your heart. And so, believing this to be true, trusting that is yours, it gives you a special confidence before God because you know what he knows is in your heart. Even that faith that takes hold of Jesus’ perfection and makes it your own comes from God and is made your own.

This confidence stays the same even when looking at your own heart and how you show love. Even when looking at your own heart it still is rooted in the love of Jesus and comes from him. Connected to the vine that is Jesus, you have his love

in your heart. Connected to Jesus and his love produces love of your own that you show to others from your heart.

Out of the faith which God desires, which he commands, which he gives and works, this true love of more than words flows so naturally that keeping God's commandments follow as well. Doing something out of love doesn't seek reward or expect recognition—you do it because you want to. And when we truly act in love, service is enjoyable. It's a pleasure. It takes away the burden of trying to gain or earn something. It removes that overbearing feeling of disappointment and frustration when you don't receive something you think you should be given. It's a relief because you just do it without coercion, obligation, having your arm twisted. You do it because you love them—whomever it is—and you love God. You do it because of God's love shown to you in his Son. While we were still sinners, Jesus died for you. What wondrous love is this that God gives to you and me who did not earn it or deserve it!

Growing in Jesus' love and what that means for your life produces your desire to share that love with how you treat those in your life. Growing in my understanding in that never-ending forgiveness of Jesus works in me to want to forgive more, to forgive better. It leads me to serve in actions not just in words. It moves my heart to support the work of sharing this love of Jesus with my offerings in the plate. It works that desire within me to follow God's will and commands. It brings me to confess my sin and rejoice in Jesus' forgiveness. Am I perfect at it? By no means. There is always room for improvement while living on this earth. I pray and I know that God's love works the same in you. There's always room for improvement—so be connected to God's love in his Word where you learn his love. Come to the Lord's Supper where you receive his love so you know what love is and how to love. Because God's loves leads to your love. Amen.