

# Sermon 44, Love God, Love Your Brother, 1 John 4:20-5:3

**Proposition:** To love God requires you to love your brother too.

- I. Loving God Without Loving Your Brother Is Impossible, 4:20-5:1
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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, John told us last time that God's love comes and awakes love in our hearts. Today, he adds that there is no love for God without love for brother. As Jesus said, the great commandment and the second commandment are both commandments. You have to love God and love your neighbor. What John emphasizes in the text before us is that they are intertwined, interrelated, indeed, mutually dependent. You can't love God without loving your brother. It is impossible, both in terms of God's law and nature's law. But you can't love your brother without loving God. Ultimately, this is because obedience is the definition of love. So let's dig in, remembering that God loved us first. His primal love powers all of this. We want to be like Him; we want to love like Him. And we have the power to love with His love, a love that is in us but not of us because it is from His Holy Spirit.

### **I. Loving God Without Loving Your Brother Is Impossible, 4:20-5:1**

Let's start by hearing John's main point: It is not possible to love God while hating your brother. Any claim to love God that's not backed up by visible love for your brother is a lie.

We've talked about this at length. Let's just review the key points. First, love is an act. At its most vague, it is a habit. But it is never merely a feeling, a disposition, or an idea. Love is an act. Therefore, someone who does not perform acts of love does not love. He hates. John knows of no neutral ground between love and hate. So love is an act. Speaking the five love languages of physical touch, quality time, gifts, acts of service, and words of affirmation is what Christians in the body should be doing for each other all the time. Love is doing what's best for the other person and enjoying the other person. These are acts, not feelings.

Second, we must remember that John has tested speech by behavior before now. He talked about the person who says "I haven't sinned; I have no sin." He talked about the person who says "I know Him," but doesn't keep the commandments. Always, actions speak louder than words. We know that. We all believe it, too, when it comes to other people. But do you believe it about yourself? Do you honestly think that your actions say more about you than your motives, excuses, and really good reasons do?

Well, you see, John thinks that. And what's more, God thinks it.

Your claim to be a lover of God can be tested and falsified by how you treat the brothers and sisters. I know, I know — none of us has the prerogative of saying “So and so is not a Christian.” But we can definitely say, “So and so does not appear to love the brothers and sisters.” The person who doesn’t care that the guy in the pew behind him has cancer? That person doesn’t love God. The person who doesn’t care that the woman in the pew ahead of him is being mistreated by her husband and blamed for it by the pastor? That person (and the husband, and the pastor) don’t love God. It’s not that complicated. It’s just hard to believe because it condemns us all.

You are my congregation. You know that I don’t begin to love you perfectly. Some of you fall through the cracks, wondering “Why doesn’t the pastor call? Why doesn’t he approach me after church? Why doesn’t he minister to my aging mom?” Some of you get more attention than you want, or feel that I don’t understand your needs and am applying the wrong kind of help. I get it. And you know what? That kind of thing is inevitable. We don’t love perfectly, even when we love with God’s love resident in us.

But though we don’t love perfectly, we must love truly. You have to have a genuine love for the brothers and sisters around you, and that love has to be worked out by real actions. Otherwise, you’re not a lover of God. You don’t love Him. In fact, John says earlier that you have never seen or known God if you don’t have a genuine love for His people.

So don’t be a liar. Don’t claim to love God when you never speak the language of love to your brothers and sisters.

John adds that if you can’t love a visible brother, you can’t love the invisible God. What does this mean? It seems pretty clear that it is talking first of all about how it’s harder to love someone you can’t see. When we think of love as quality time or touch or gifts, then we think “How on earth could I perform any of those acts of love toward God?” I can’t sit down on the couch with God. I can’t hold His hand and feel His strong grip on my fingers. I can’t give Him a Starbucks gift card.

And John comes back to that and says, “Well, here’s the deal: If you can’t figure out how to love God because He’s invisible, that excuse vanishes when it comes to your brother. Your brother is right here, and he’s taking gifts. He can be touched. You can spend quality time with him and know that he is there.

That’s part of it. But other commentators advance an idea that’s almost the opposite. Rather than saying that God is hard to love because He’s invisible and the brother easy because you can see him, they think of this as saying “Your visible brother is harder to love than God.” How? Because your brother is a rotten sinner! And rotten sinners are much harder to love than perfect supreme beings are. If you can’t love a rotten sinner, then you don’t know what true love is. Only when you have to love someone who’s stabbed you in the back, who’s gone out of their way to make your life harder, who’s hurt one of your kids, do you recognize the need to love with God’s love. Then you’ll see that loving God actually demands sacrifices from you. It

demands that you go through pain and learn forgiveness. You learn a lot when you try to love someone you see all the time.

#### **A. It's a Law of God, 4:21**

But more than this, it is a law of God: God will not accept any love that does not equally radiate outward to your Christian brother. As far as God is concerned, you don't really love Him if you don't love His children.

Imagine a noble widow with many children. A good man comes into her life, they hit it off, and he ends up proposing. At that point, she says "Before I can give you an answer, I have to ask about my kids. What will your relationship with them be like?"

The man says "You know, I was never that into kids and seeing yours — well, frankly the kids will continue to be your responsibility. I'm in love with you."

What is the widow going to say? "Goodbye."

Brothers and sisters, as far as this devoted mother is concerned, someone who doesn't love her kids doesn't love her. As far as God is concerned, someone who doesn't love His kids doesn't love Him! He has said up front what kind of love He wants. If you don't display that love toward His children, if you don't speak the love languages to your brothers and sisters, then God has already announced that He doesn't believe you love Him. And if God doesn't believe it, then it isn't true, because He believes all true propositions!

Love your brother, or you don't love God.

#### **B. It's a Law of Nature, 5:1b**

In fact, nature teaches us the same thing. If you love the begetter, you love the begotten! Shakespeare takes this absurd lengths in the first part of his *Sonnets*, arguing in innumerable clever ways that the fair young man should reproduce and have children to carry on his beauty. I love you so much that I can't bear to see you childless!

Let me put this negatively: If you have a problem with my kids, we're not going to be friends very long. Right? We all know how this works. In the worst cases, of course, it spreads wickedness. Children go off the deep end and the parents decide that whatever evil thing their kids are into must be good, because, well, they're their kids! But in all cases, I can guarantee that nothing will torpedo a relationship faster than indicating how little you think of somebody's kid. If you don't love my child, then I am going to conclude you don't love me. And though you tell me all day long that you have nothing against me, it's just my kid that's a rotten piece of work, I'm not going to believe you!

So if you run down your brothers and sisters, even privately, what does God think? Does He take that as a sign that you are deeply in love with Him? If you neglect your brothers and sisters, what does God think about that? Let me put it this way: In a new church, how long does it take you to learn all the names? How many weeks per name? If you've been in this church for more months than there are members, and yet you don't know their names, shame on you. How does love for your brothers and sisters dwell in you if you haven't even met them or talked to them often enough to learn their name?

Brothers and sisters, we have to love one another. Otherwise, we are making it clear to each other and the watching world that we don't love God.

## **II. Loving God Is a Prerequisite for Loving Your Brother, 5:2**

Yet all of that said, the Christian faith is not primarily about the ethical imperative of brother love. Brother love is important. But more important is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who in turn raises us from spiritual death to new life. As those alive from the dead, He empowers us to love each other. But that love for each other does not exist without love for God.

“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we speak the five love languages to them.” Is that what John says here? Not at all. We know that we love God's children when we love God.

What does that mean? Well, repeat after me: Love is an act. To love God is not to feel good about Him, or to wish Him well. To love God is one and the same thing with obeying God. Desiring and choosing Him above all others is shown by doing what He says to do.

## **III. Obedience Is the Definition of Love, 5:3**

John makes that clear in v. 3. To love God is to keep His commandments. You can't love your brothers and sisters without loving God. If you're stealing, are you loving the people you're stealing from? If you're committing adultery, are you loving your spouse — or your paramour? If you're taking God's name in vain, are you loving God — or the people who hear you doing it? If you're coveting, are you loving God or loving the stuff your little heart desires? Brothers and sisters, obedience is the definition of love. We love our brothers and sisters by loving God and keeping His commands. We love God by loving our brothers and sisters. These truths go together. That's why John puts them back-to-back here. He loved us first. His love has awakened our hearts to love. And when it has successfully done that, we must love each other and Him. That's all there is to it.

How? Practice. Pray. Try to speak the love languages, and when you get attacked (and you will) go back to God and ask Him for the grace to forgive and keep on loving, even when it hurts. How did Jesus go to the cross? How did He love like that? He knew how to draw on His Father's resources. That's why He prayed for an hour and more in Gethsemane. He needed help to love. You will need that same help. But you have it. Keep asking, keep obeying, keep loving — and you will know that you love God and His children. Amen.