

Explore: Real love

June 22, 2015

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for July 5 focuses on 1 John 4:7-21.*

After teaching believers about discernment, John moved into a discussion about demonstration. Believers are wholly to oppose the demonstrable behavior of the false teachers and “antichrists” by demonstrating the same kind of love as seen in the Jesus Christ. Consider again that John advocates for believers not only to know the truth, but also to do the truth. To do the truth means a Christian enacts the way and teachings of Jesus in his/her daily life. We commonly refer to doing the truth as “living on mission.” The Holy Spirit undoubtedly gives conviction and encouragement to believers willing to do the truth.

In this lesson, we will explore John’s proclamation that believers ought both to hear and do the word of God (James 1:22). We also will observe the unique role of the Holy Spirit in equipping the believer to demonstrate Christ’s love in a powerful way. In fact, one may notice a Trinitarian theme to this lesson, as John distinctively discusses ways in which the Son, the Spirit and the Father greatly impact the daily life of the Christian who lives on mission.

Seen in the Son (4:7-11)

John began a lengthy discussion at this point concerning Christian love. Readers may even locate some similarities between this passage and another famous “love” Scripture penned by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. Both John and Paul pointed to the truth that Jesus’ life, death and resurrection demonstrated God’s love for a rebellious humanity. John specifically called for believers to love one another with the same kind of love God showed for us by sending Jesus to die on the cross for our sins

(John 3:16; 1 John 3:16).

But what is a good definition of love? John used the term *agape*, a Greek word for love that has a rich meaning and is linked inextricably to the love of Christ (John 13:35). It is important to note John excluded other Greek terms for love such as *eros* and *phileo*. *Eros* refers to a romantic and emotional type of love, while *phileo* is the kind of love associated with close or enduring friendships.

Agape surpasses *eros* and *phileo*, and John used the term more than 20 times in his first epistle. One of the closest and most literal definitions we can get for *agape* would include all of the adjectives Paul used in 1 Corinthians 13 and more. At its most basic, however, *agape* means “sacrificial love.” *Agape* may be located not in emotion, feelings or romanticism but in exacting and maturing free-will choice. God loved us with *agape* even though we did not reciprocate (4:10). *Agape* ought to be considered the highest form of love, since God is love.

Incidentally, the phrase “God is love” should not be taken from a reductionist point of view. We cannot simply make God out to be a force or energy as is popular in our culture and media. The phrase refers to the nature and character of God. God’s love therefore expresses itself in a holistic way when believers practice and demonstrate the same kind of *agape* love towards others in a tangible way.

Perfected by the Spirit (4:12-15)

John bluntly and wonderfully assures Christians of the power and presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes it possible for the believer to demonstrate God’s kind of love while standing for the truth. Notice, too, the Holy Spirit is not a “creation” of humankind. God gives believers his Spirit (John 15; 17:21-23). Accordingly, we can be certain of our salvation and our continued maturity in a personal relationship with

God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in our daily lives. The Holy Spirit consequently enables us to confess the truth that God sent Jesus to die for our sins on the cross and the Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. Our confession and our hope become foundational for spiritual maturity and growth in the knowledge of God and his will.

Defined by the Father (4:16-18)

John again makes the clarifying statement “God is love.” Since love is the nature and character of God, God defines genuine love. Specifically, there is no fear in *agape* love. John referred here to fear of punishment for sin in death, judgment and eternal separation from God. The Christian has no need to fear such things for the believer lives by the love of God with the guidance and encouragement of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The old self has died, and Christ is making all things new (Romans 6:6). John even said the one who fears is not made perfect in love. The Greek word for “perfect” refers not to our contemporary and rather unattainable definition. For John, “perfect” meant “complete, mature or whole.” In other words, the believer who still fears judgment and eternity has a ways to go in becoming mature in the faith. Fear is a great hindrance to sustainable and growing *agape* love.

Imitated by his people (4:19-21)

Accordingly, believers are to love others sacrificially because God first loved us (Romans 5:8). One of the most visible and helpful ways believers can share their witness about Jesus Christ is by loving one another with God’s kind of love. Enabled by God’s love for them, believers reflect their Father’s character by showing love to one another. In fact, John boldly declared anyone who claims to love God with *agape* yet hates one in the family of faith is a liar (1 John 3:14). That is, love for each other must be visible, tangible and real—emanating from the Holy Spirit.