

Turn to John 4

Applying Love to Our Witness

Sharing Jesus with family, close friends and others who know us very well
I John 4:7-12

33
14
22
36
Must keep it
Moody - NO
side tracks

John's brother-in-law had not dated a woman in over a decade. At some point, you would have expected him to wonder if his brother-in-law was gay. Others seem to know this, but it never occurred to John because of the family connection. Then one day, John asked his brother-in-law, Joe, point-blank if he was gay. Laughing, his brother-in-law said, **"it's about time you figured it out. I decided not to come out to any family members, but if anyone asks, I wouldn't lie. Now you know."**

So John and his wife faced a difficult dilemma. Do they just say that politically correct lines of our culture... *"Well, that's great. We know lots of gay people. We're not so intolerant as to reject you simply because your sexual orientation is different from ours."* Or should they quote the Bible verses about "abominations" and tell him, he won't inherit the kingdom of God?

While fully affirming all of the Scriptures teaching about the sinfulness of homosexual practice but also wanting to keep the lines of communication open, this couple attempted to walk the tightrope of grace and truth. (side note: remember the Bible's condemnation is about homosexual practice, not inclinations). So they said to Joe, **"we're really glad you told us. We'd hate for there to be any kind of barrier between us. We really love you and wouldn't want anything to ever hinder our relationship with you. But we think homosexuality isn't good and so we'd like to talk to you about another way to live."**

Joe rolled his eyes and sarcastically said something about talking about **"some day."** Even though they had frequent visits with him up to that point, those visits as well as phone calls and emails came to a screeching halt. For the next year, they hardly heard a word from him because he knew their thoughts on his lifestyle.

Homosexuality presents only one of many painful dynamics that challenge our ability to love a family member.

- How does a Christian wife love her unsaved husband?
- How do Christian parents love their drug-addicted son? Do they say it is fine?
- How does a college sophomore love his soon-to-be divorced parents?
- How does a Christian sister love her newly converted-to-Mormonism brother?

To help us, we want to first look at what love is and then how to express it. We'll finish with some further implications. So, let's dig in.

how to witness to our closest family

PROPOSITION: We are to love one another because God loves us, His very nature is love and God is now transforming us to reveal His love to others.

I. What love is

I John 4:7-12

A. The reason for love

I John 4:7,11,12

You will find the phrase “**love one another**” three times in I John 4:7-12. A reason is given with each. So we are given three reasons to love others in this short passage.

- First, because “love comes from God” – **READ v 7a**
- Second, because “**God so loves us**” – **READ v 11**
- And third, because it makes God’s love evident to others AS WELL AS helps us experience more of God’s love ourselves. – **READ v 12**. God is spirit, so He is invisible. When we love each other, it allows other people to see evidence of God’s reality. And when we love each other it completes God’s love in us – that is, we personally experience more of God’s love.

All of this flows out of the nature of God. **READ v 8**. Love is not just something God does, but it is actually a key aspect of God’s core character – for God is love.

Contrast these **God centered** reasons for loving one another with the ones God doesn’t give here. The Lord doesn’t call us to love others because people **deserve love** or *because people need love* or because loving others **will help us feel better about ourselves**. Instead, as Christians, we love others because God loves us, His very nature is love and God is now transforming us to reveal His love to others.

B. The source of love

I John 4:7

That is the WHY! Look back at v 7 and we are given the source of such incredible love that can transform both the one showing the love and the one receiving it. **READ v 7**. As we sense God’s presence IN us and His love FOR us, then it both softens and emboldens us to love even the most unlovable people – which includes certain people in every family. When we see how much Jesus has loved us despite all our failures that then breaks down our reluctance and motivates us to show love to those who aren’t naturally loveable.

C. The description of love

I John 4:9-10

(Propitiation – Expiation)

Our passage also gives us a description of this love so we don’t confuse it with our culture’s description in songs and romantic movies. This is a *description* rather than a *definition*. By the way, my personal definition of love is “**seeking the best for another for the long run.**” When we understand God’s love for us, it encourages us to love others that same way. **God’s love takes the initiative, gives sacrificially and satisfies wrath.**

God takes the initiative to love us FIRST. **READ v 9-10a**. God show His love for us by sending Jesus. And He did that while we were yet opposed to him according to Romans 5:8. To make sure we understand this v 10 adds “**not that we loved God first**”. God’s love *totally takes the initiative* long before we ever start to respond positively to God. So, our love for others in our family requires WE take the first ... and second ... and third step. If you are waiting for an unsaved relative to show some

love to you before you show them love – that is the very opposite of the gospel you want to bring to them.

God's love takes the initiative – it is also sacrificial. **READ v 10**. Notice this love is more than **“God cared enough to send His very best.”** Jesus came as a sacrifice. It cost Jesus His all. Showing love to our unsaved relatives and close friends will be costly – we will need to sacrifice time, finances, comfort and our rights.

Verse 10 also shows us what kind of sacrifice it is. It is an **“atoning sacrifice”** *What does that mean?* Actually the best English word here is **“propitiation”**, but we don't use that word in our language anymore. **Propitiation** means to **turn away from wrath**, Contrast that with **expiation** means to **make amends for a wrong**. God's love goes beyond making up for wrongs, it turns away wrath. While we cringe at the word **“wrath”** because of peoples' uncontrolled or sinful outbursts – there is a righteous wrath that should come to any moral person when we see true injustice – in fact, a God who didn't punish evil would not be worth worshipping. When I heard those 5 teenagers were burned to death because a man willfully drove on the wrong side of the interstate – then stole a police car and came back to ram the site again, there was a wrath that arose because of both justice and love. It was unjust for that man to disobey the law and put others in jeopardy. It also flowed from love for the life of young people. *Can you imagine someone being unfeeling when they heard that?* **God's propitiating love** comes from His holiness whose wrath rightly rises against all sin and selfishness. But then God willingly takes that penalty on Himself out of love. That kind of LOVE is deeper & more profound than any slogan can capture. As John Stott said, **“God loves sinners who are unworthy of His love, and indeed subject to His wrath. He loves us and sent this Son to rescue us, not because we are lovable, but because He is love ... No-one who has been to the cross & seen God's immeasurable & unmerited love displayed there can go back to a life of selfishness.”**

II. What love isn't

This true picture of love also helps us know what love for our family & closest friends isn't:

A. ... it is not a vague acceptance of anything

Love isn't some vague acceptance of anything another person does so **THEY feel good**. Many of our relatives & closest friends already believe that God loves them, but think it is because they are nice enough – or at least better than others. They think that is enough for salvation - that is why they think virtually everyone is going to heaven. **So our calls to repent and have faith in Jesus seem pointless or unnecessary.** This idea that God or people should accept anything I do because of “unconditional love” simply isn't true. That's not love.

B. ... it isn't an instant fix

Love also isn't a quick fix for our complex problems. While Jesus grants forgiveness of sins immediately when we repent & believe, deliverance from the snares of the

devil often takes more than a hug. You've may have heard some say, "**Jesus hung out with prostitutes and tax collectors,**" then add, "**If we did the same today, people would beat down the doors of the church instead of fleeing from them.**" I'm totally for challenging true self-righteousness, but this is a romantic notion that isn't close to reality. It discounts the depth of sin and hinders the long-term sacrificial love that IS needed to actually help. A single loving action is great, but it is not going to instantly fix all their problems even if they pray to follow Jesus.

Larry's church was proud as they started a new outreach to the prostitutes in their city. They were sure that the pimps and prostitutes would stream into the church after they brought them meals and told them of God's love. As Larry said, "**It all seemed so hip at first.**" But the honeymoon was over in only a few months as the web of drugs, crime and sex trafficking entangles people in ways that boggle the mind. I am not saying this to discourage any from reaching out to such areas – we need to do more of that. But true evangelism requires perseverance, tenacity and a toughness that won't come from the romantic idea that if we just hug people more, everything in their life will suddenly turn around. Now your relatives are probably not in the sex trade, but they ARE just as far from Jesus – just as you and I were before we came to faith. We need God's initiating, sacrificial, & propitiatory love flowing through us, not Hallmark sentimentality.

C. ... it isn't Christian stoicism

This love God is growing in us is also NOT Christian stoicism. Stoics try to get rid of feeling. Many Christians think the right response to their kid abandoning the faith is to coolly & calmly say, "**I'm just trusting Jesus for their return.**" That doesn't sound like Jesus who wept over Jerusalem because they wouldn't turn to God or Paul who had such sorrow for His peoples' unwillingness to believe that he wished he could be cursed so they would repent. God's initiating, sacrificial and propitiating love HURTS. God weeps over our sin and waywardness.

Emily went to her pastor and asked for some way to take the pain away. Her 28 year old son had left the church in college, was now living with his girlfriend and very distant to his parents. "**How can I pray for him without feeling so bad?**" She didn't realize it, but she wanted stoicism, not Christian love. She wanted her immediate comfort more than her son's salvation. The pastor wisely asked her WHY she would want such a thing. **Can anyone really love a sinful human without pain?** (*To make it clear - we are all sinful.*) The pastor urged her to stop praying a prayer she really didn't want God to answer. An initiating, sacrificial, propitiating love knows that there is a justified, righteous wrath of God towards our grown kid's ongoing rebellion against God. Why would we want to get rid of the tears? Shouldn't our hearts feel what God's heart feels? Aren't those times where we have a lump in our throat, a knot in our stomach and a tear in our eyes a reflection of this deep, deep love of Jesus? **Emotionless stoicism is not our goal!** But neither does God want those tears to cripple or clinically depress us – there is a trust we need in God. So real Christian love

puts us somewhere between crippling despair and a cool, unfeeling demeanor. Real love hurts in a broken world.

III. Showing love to our family and those who know us best

So how else can the deep love of God help us witness to our family and closest friends?

A. Expressing love

God's love moves us to actually express our love. ^{MORE} You may never have put this into words, but we most expect & assume love in our family, but family is often the place where love is communicated and received the least. It is rare to meet a parent who says, **"I don't love my child."** Yet it is not unusual to hear a grown child wonder how much their mom or dad really loved them. In families, it is easy to STOP taking the initiative in expressing love and assume relatives know we love them. God's love calls us to KEEP TAKING the initiative to love others. It encourages us not to ASSUME they feel loved, but to seek to love in ways they will receive as love. NOW this should never violate God's truth as we saw last week. It would **not** be loving for John, who I mentioned at the start, to tell his brother-in-law that God was fine with him living the gay lifestyle, even though that is exactly what his brother-in-law would say would make him most feel loved. It is NOT loving to put feelings, comfort or lack of conflict before eternal truth. Our goal is real love that seeks the best for the other person for the long run. But even in these tough situations, we want to look for other ways to sacrificially show love to them.

Let's go back to a situation I mentioned a couple weeks ago where Pastor Randy Newman learned that his High School son was addicted to drugs. Please remember I'm highly indebted to Randy for this entire series. Fast-forward 18 months when John, his son, comes back from long-term treatment and a year of special schooling. John mentions that he hated all the rules they had in the house. Two thoughts came to Randy's mind: first **"well if you are live in my house, you live by my rules."** And second, he thought of all the reasons why these rules were justified. But Randy also knew by now, no matter how justified those rules were, there was something in their relationship that led his son to sense he wasn't loved. So against every natural feeling to justify himself, Randy replied, **"well, that obviously didn't work, did it?"** To say his son was stunned is an understatement. Randy's goal wasn't the rules, it was to help his son avoid enslavement to cultural sins and mature. While not taking the responsibility for his son's bad choices, love demanded he try a different approach and try to find some common ground so his son could feel his love, **"I'd really like to find something that does work for both you and me because I really love you. I want things to be better between us."** Randy did not let go of the truth or important rules, but he did learn to intentionally show love by quoting fewer Bible verses AT his son and spending more time with him doing activities his son liked, but didn't interest Randy before. His son felt love and also accepted house rules.

I made him feel loved

B. Extending actions of love

While we think others KNOW we love them, it is important to regularly extend actions of love without an ulterior motive, including expecting them to change or let us witness to them. Love requires on-going sacrificial giving that is not about us. I was intrigued by a seminar put on by a Christian group at a secular University. It was to help those college students know how to witness to their parents. One would think it would focus on techniques and arguments to open up skeptical parents. Instead the speaker handed out paper and asked everyone to write down answers to the following questions ...

1. How many times have you called your parents in the past month just to talk – not to ask them for anything, especially money? *Groans*
2. How many times in the past semester have you told your parents that you love them? *More groans*
3. How many communications have you written to your parents this year where you simply shared something you appreciated about them or fill them in on your life without asking for anything. *The laments are loud by now!*
4. List three ways you express love to your parents other than in words. *Blank stares were all over the room and one person the back yelled out "three?"* The leader said how about "obedience?" "Honor?" "Helping around the house?"

As you can imagine, this short quiz really drove home the simple point that we assume those closest to us know we love them. But we are doing far fewer actions to communicate that love than ~~they~~ we realize. *which the other person can receive as love.*

C. Expecting no love in return

Even when we love abundantly and share Jesus fully, they may never respond. But we are giving them the best chance. Now we can't do these actions expecting something in return. Jesus sacrificed for the world, but not all in the world will humble themselves, repent, believe and make Jesus the Lord of their lives. Showing love without expecting something in return is especially important in a marriage where one of the spouses is a Christian and the other is not. That means the Christian spouse can not look to their spouse for total fulfillment. That's only for God. They need to put their hope in God, not their spouse's conversion. It's important the Christian spouse not offer themselves up as the perfect example of Christian faith, instead always point to the perfect example of Christ. Remember that actions can speak louder than words, but words are still necessary. Very important, look for places you can do things in common with your unsaved spouse even if those activities aren't your favorite. And never neglect your own personal spiritual life especially participating in a local church.

People come into a spiritually mismatch marriage two different ways – and they require two different approaches. In some, both were non-Christians before the marriage and then one became a Christian. The verses in the New Testament deal with this situation. But in other marriages, a Christian married a non-Christian – that is the

one I'd give some help based on our theme today. There are many motivations for dating and marrying a non-Christian, but they are all bad. Christians who have married non-Christians need to repent of whatever idolatry or thinking led them to disobey God here – because a spiritually mixed marriage is always disobedience to God. Now that repentance is not to the unsaved spouse – that will just sound like you are blaming them. It is only after real repentance and ceasing to complain about the consequences of ~~that~~ ^{their own} sinful decision that one's witness for Jesus can be effective.

Take Don. He has witnessed to his unsaved wife for more than a decade and she is totally uninterested in Jesus. He loved her. But HE needed to admit that he got married in disobedience to God out of fear he was getting older and wouldn't find anyone else to love him. That is NOT an excuse – that is an idol that needs to be repented of in the deepest way. Although she had absolutely no interest in church or Jesus before they got married, he figured she would eventually come around. That is another idol that needs to be repented of – thinking we know better than God. The Bible is clear – a Christian should NEVER marry a non-Christian or even a lukewarm Christian. It wasn't until Don genuinely repented to the Lord and other close Christian friends, without excuses or expectations – that Don could pursue his relationship with Jesus in more freedom and joy. Interestingly, that's when his wife began to notice.

D. Tough love

Because of time, I'm going to skip the illustration of using tough love when an older family member refuses to let us EVER talk about spiritual things. You can read that on-line at our church website under teaching, then sermon notes. It should be up ^{by Wed} ~~early~~ in the week.

As the only believer in a Jewish family, Rachel was frustrated because her aging grandfather would never let her talk about spiritual things. If she ever tried to bring something up, he would yell **"I don't talk about religion - ever."** She asked her spiritual leader what she could do to break through to him. ***"Don't accept the defensive position. Ask him if he loves you and if he respects you. I imagine he'll say 'yes'. Then ask him why he never lets you choose the topic of discussion."*** "He'll tell me it because he is older than me". Respond with ***"So? Does the older person always DICTATE the topic of discussion?"*** Use "dictate" to challenge the intolerance. "I could never say that." ***"Yes you can. Just say something like: 'When people love each other, they both give and take. A real loving relationship means sacrifice in both directions. For all these years, I've sacrificed my desire to talk to you about God because you have always stopped me. That doesn't sound fair! If you really love me, you'd sacrifice a little bit too.'"*** Now this 'tough love' is a one-time thing and not meant as a way to manipulate a person to regularly let you say what you want. But we love our family too much not to share the gospel at least once in depth with them.

E. Persevering in love

Let's end by going back to our beginning illustration of John trying to balance grace and truth in witnessing to his gay brother-in-law, Joe. You probably thought it was a failure since Joe stopped communicating with him. And you may even have felt John shouldn't have said anything because it made Joe feel bad. But God's love perseveres and that is what John & his wife did. They never stopped earnestly praying for Joe, they regularly sent Joe notes of encouragement without any hint of asking for change and then once boldly included a book titled "You Don't Have to be Gay." Joe didn't respond. This period lasted a few years.

Then John read an article about AIDS that truly frightened him. So he wrote a letter expressing his concern and included Joe Dallas' book "**Desires in Conflict.**" This time Joe did respond. *The difference?* The gay life had ceased to be thrilling. It now brought one disappointment after another, so Joe was ready to hear a different side of the story. They restated their love for Joe – that they wanted his best and they were going to be there no matter what his decision. They persevered in love. They let him do most of the talking. He shared horror stories of Christian responses. While they briefly tried to explain the grace/truth aspects, but they really concentrated on was encouraging him to restore his faith in Jesus before pushing for outward change. He would not fully understand God's way without God. This led Joe to quietly try to find a church he could seek Jesus in his confusion, which he found. While none of that congregation had struggled with homosexual desires, they all saw themselves as sinners – as I hope we do here. They didn't excuse sin, but called each other to repentance & change. There he learned to relate in healthy, nonsexual ways to men and women again. As Joe said it, "**I had to get my wires untangled with men before I could even think about relating to women.**" The process took years including support groups, individual counseling, and a whole lot of encouragement from people who believe God can do the impossible.

Today Joe is married. *Yes, to a woman!* He plays delightfully with his daughter, actively participates in the church and counsels men with unwanted same-sex attraction. *Sacrificially persevering in love for years and decades is God's call for us.* One of the reasons we need to persevere is because people can't hear our message of hope until they start feeling the pain of their sin. It was no different for any of us.

More next week