

Love in Action
1 John 4:7-21
September 27, 2026
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Well, I have good news and bad news for you today. The bad news is that we're pausing our sermon series on the Bible for a sermon to kick off our fall stewardship campaign. The good news is that I'm not going to talk about money. I'm not going to say "God loves a cheerful giver," which God does, or "Where your treasure is, there is your heart also," which it is. I'm not going to talk about the importance of regular giving to the church and how your money is needed for us to accomplish our mission or how increasing your giving is a way to step up in faith. I'm not going to say any of that because you already know it. This is an incredibly generous congregation, and you put your resources to work in amazing ways. So, don't worry, this may be a stewardship sermon, but not one of those stewardship sermons. My apologies to our Stewardship and Finance teams. I promise we'll still pass the offering plates later. You're not completely off the hook.

Instead, we're going to talk about love. Seems easy enough, right? The last time I preached on this passage from John was May 2, 2021, our first regular Sunday back in person after 14 months of pre-recorded sermons and parking lot worship services. I chose this passage to help us ease back into being a face-to-face community again because it's so simple.

"God is love." What could be easier, right? "Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another." Come on, John, lob us another softball. What's next? "Breathe in, breathe out?" "Blink your eyes?" How much simpler can it get? And yet. And yet, have you seen our world today? The command in John's letter is ridiculously simple: God loves you, you love others. So, why are we so terrible at doing this?

"I'm not terrible at it." I know you're thinking that, because I'm thinking that. It's tempting to want to exempt yourself here, to say that other people may not love with God's love but you do because you're a good person and all. But, as Paul reminds us in Romans, "All have fallen short," even the good ones among us. Listen to what author Phillip Gulley says: "For many, religion is how we decide who to love and who to hate." As a loving Christian, I want to argue with him, but history shows otherwise. In fact, here's a very unscientific list of the people I know who have been hated in the name of religion: pagans, Samaritans, Jews, Muslims, women, Protestants, divorced people, Indigenous people, Black people, LGBTQ+ people, people who dance and play cards, people who voted differently from me, and people who hate people I love. History shows that Christians have a poor record of finding motivation for loving these people but have found ample reasons – based in scripture – for hating them.

Now, "hate" is a strong word and I'd like to think I don't hate anyone, just like I'd like to think I don't have an enemy. But that doesn't give me a pass from this passage. Someone sent me a video recently that really captured this for me. You know the term "bestie?" It's shorthand for a good friend, someone you love. "He's my bestie." In the video, the person was advocating for the use of the term "worstie." This person isn't your enemy. You don't hate them. You just don't like them. I can think of a few worsties in my life, present company excluded. If I'm honest with myself, there are also people I hate because they wish harm on people I love or are make decisions that are hurting others.

What we need to name today is that any justification for feeling that way goes against who God calls us to be. God's kin-dom is characterized as a place where love abounds and there

are no “worsties.” In fact, the Bible goes even further than that, as we heard in today’s scripture. It doesn’t say God is loving, which of course God is. It doesn’t say God loves, which of course God does. It says God is love. So if God is love, and we are created in the image of God, then that means we are created to love. Wow, have we messed that up or what? There is so much hate in our world today. Maybe that’s because we don’t know what Godly love is.

What kind of love is this of which John speaks, mentioning it 28 times in this passage? The Greek word John uses for love is *agape*. *Agape* is a selfless, other-focused love that represents love in its highest form. When Jesus speaks of the love God has for him, it is *agape* love. In fact, John opens this passage by calling his readers, “Beloved.” The Greek word is *agapetoi*. We are *agaped* by God, and called to *agape* God and others.

So, what separates *agape* love from the other types of love we experience in our lives? Is it possible to *agape* ice cream? Can we *agape* our favorite sports team? I thought the highest form of love that existed was the way I feel about barbeque, but apparently not. I can’t *agape* a good smoked brisket. So, what is *agape* love, this love that defines who God is and how God feels about us?

Well, it’s not something we’re born with. I had a great discussion once with a small group about whether or not we’re born with love. We concluded that we’re born with the capacity to love, just as we’re born with the capacity to hate. And love often calls us to do things that go against our instinct for survival—sharing our resources, making ourselves vulnerable, putting someone else first. We are born with the capacity to love, just as we are born with the capacity to hate.

So where does love come from? Simple. We learn to love by being loved, just like we learn to hate by being hated. Both the love we feel and the hate we feel is learned from others and is a direct result of how we are treated and how we are told that God feels about others, especially those different from us. The people in this world that hate others didn’t conjure up that hate on their own. They learned it from someone else, and that hate gets passed down through the generations.

We’re not born with *agape*, and we can’t manufacture it. It is a gift from God. There’s nothing we can do to earn God’s love. If there were, none of us would be invited to this table. But we are ALL invited. That’s grace-filled love, which God gives us in overflowing abundance. The natural response to being loved in abundance by God is sharing God’s love with others.

Here’s where we humans start to lose the plot. John spells it out pretty plainly: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” What I find so comforting and challenging about this is that love always has to have an object. If you talk about being loving but don’t direct that love toward an object, then it’s an empty platitude. You can’t say you love God and despise or belittle someone, no matter how much you disagree with them. Those two things are diametrically opposed. I would go so far as to say you can’t stay silent while people exclaim hate toward others and still love God. The opposite of love is not just hate; if love is an action, then it’s opposite is also apathy, indifference to the value of others in God’s eyes. If we’re not speaking up and speaking out and using everything at our disposal to make sure God’s love is proclaimed in this world, are we perpetuating the problem? Are we enabling the haters to continue hating?

You see, *agape* is not just a noun, it’s a verb. God’s love is something that is not just to be received or experienced; it is something to be expressed. Love in action is the most faithful way to counter the hate we see around us. Remember what John says: “Beloved, since God loved

us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” We most beautifully and perfectly represent Jesus in this world when we love each other.

That’s a tall order, right? It helps to know this command was written by a man who, just a one chapter before, calls his opponents “children of the devil.” Talk about having a worstie! That’s not very loving! Even John can’t get this exactly right. The truth is I can never love like God loves, because God loves people that I don’t want to love. But *agape* calls me out of my comfort zone, out of my cushy, insulated world of people who are just like me, into a world where I am challenged to show love for those whom I’d just as soon ignore, dismiss, even write off as children of the devil.

There’s so much more that could be said about this, but here is what I want to say today. You are loved. You are loved. No qualifiers, no conditions. You may not always feel loveable or act loveable, but that doesn’t stop God from loving you. You are made in God’s image, God is love, so you are loved. But that sentence isn’t complete until we add that you are also called to love others. We talk a lot about love. Love is at the core of our belief in Jesus Christ. But the real question is, “Do we show love toward people in real-life ways that help them understand that God loves them, too?” We’re all human, so we all have limits to our love. God is calling us to push those limits beyond our comfort zone, to direct our energies and resources toward tangibly expressing that love in this world. How do we put everything God has given us into action as an expression of God’s love?

We can make up all kinds of reasons why it’s OK to hate someone else, even saying we hate them because they hate others. But isn’t that the same thing as perpetuating the hatred we hate in the first place? We have to start here, at the heart of Jesus, at the heart of our faith. We have to stand up against anyone who claims that hate is a part of faith. We have to lift up our voices on behalf of those who are silenced by division and conflict. We have to have the courage to say that all people matter to God, especially those who are told they don’t matter by others. We have to not only say with our mouths but live out with our hands and feet the most basic, fundamental fact of scripture: “God is love.” Dr. King said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” At its essence, I believe stewardship is simply putting God’s love into action. Let’s show the world what that looks like.