

Loving God Truly

1 John 4:19 - 5:3 We love Him because He first loved us. ²⁰ If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? ²¹ And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also. Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him. ² By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. ³ For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.

On one occasion John Flavel preached from these words: "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema, maranatha." The discourse was unusually solemn, particularly the explanation of the words anathema, maranatha—"cursed with a curse, cursed of God, with a bitter and grievous curse." When he rose to pronounce the benediction he paused, and said, "How shall I bless this whole assembly, when every person in it, who loveth not the Lord Jesus Christ, is anathema, maranatha?"

The seriousness of this sermon so affected people, that one man, who had a high position in society, fell senseless to the floor. Fifty-three years afterwards the memory of this sermon resulted in the conversions of a man who had heard it, named Luke Short, at 100 years old. If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed.

We're not really used to thinking about loving God in such stern and life-or-death ways. Our current Christian culture has made us think that loving God is the icing on the cake, the buffed-up and super-fit Christianity, which some people reach. Very rarely have we had someone say to us, if you do not love God, you are not saved and are not one of his.

But in fact, the text which John Flavel was using, I Corinthians 16:22 says just that. Ephesians puts it positively *Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.*

Loving God is at the beating heart of Christianity. It is the first and greatest commandment. And it is a sign of eternal life. It's a sign that comes up in these verses of 1 John.

John has been describing signs of life. He has used the illustration of abiding: God in us and we in God. To be in God and to have God in you is assuring indeed. You are bonded to God, organically linked to Him. Within this section, he has been describing what it looks like when God's love for us is known and believed – when we believe and experience God's love. We saw last week that it casts out fear.

But as you would expect, if this relationship is reciprocal – God in us and we in God, the same will be true of love. Not only do true believers know and experience God's love for them, but they in turn, love God.

Just as John has described what it feels like to know and believe God's love for you, he is now going to describe what it is to love God. This is all part of assurance. True signs of eternal life include knowing God's love for you, but it certainly includes loving God. Only true believers love God. Those who love God truly are truly born again.

But there are a lot of false claims on the matter of loving God. It's an easy statement to make. God has many flatterers in the world.

Here John wishes to show us what it really means to love God. To separate feigned love from sincere love, false love from true love, John is going to show us three characteristics of truly loving God. He's going to show us that loving God begins with a new birth, loves other believers and seeks to obey God.

Beginning in verse 19, we find the first key characteristic of true love for God.

I. You Love God Truly, When You Have Been Born Into His Family v19

1 John 4:19 *We love Him because He first loved us.*

Some translations omit "Him", but the majority of Greek manuscripts contain it, and I think it is the better translation. We love Him, because He first loved us.

Our love for God is grounded upon, and exists because of His prior love for us. Before you ever thought of loving God, God loved you first.

1 John 4:10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Now what did God do to us and for us, that we can now love Him truly? In what way did God love us first that became the ground of our love for Him? Was it His example of love that provokes people to love Him? Well, it involves that, but that cannot be the answer, because many people see God's love demonstrated towards them and are not moved to love Him in return. Was it His decision to send His Son to die for our sins? Well, it does include that, but once again, many people know the gospel, but do not love God.

The loving thing which God did for us and to us that becomes the ground of our love for Him is when He begat us, when He gave us new life, put His life into us, caused us to be born again.

Ephesians 2:4-6 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

The start of love for God is when God placed a new heart within us, placed His nature inside us and opened our blind eyes. This is when love for God sprang up in our hearts.

This thing called *regeneration*, or being born again, is a marvellous thing. It is an invasion from above, an implantation of something not previously there. As amazing as making bread and fish out of five loaves and two fish, as amazing as raising Lazarus from the dead is the miracle of regeneration – God creates a new principle within you, He grants you a new heart, and raises you from spiritual death.

Way back in the Old Testament prophets, this kind of heart change was prophesied.

Deuteronomy 30:6 "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

Ezekiel 11:19 "Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, "that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God.

God wants us to understand something very clearly: Love for God is not a self-generated thing. Love for God is not a human initiative. Love for God springs up when the heart is changed. God

must give you His own nature, so that you are inclined towards Him.

When this loving act on God's part occurs, He draws you, and the person he draws you to is Jesus Christ. *2 Thessalonians 2:13 But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth)*

The first thing one does, simultaneous with regeneration is the act of trusting Jesus as your Saviour from sin, and the Lord of your life.

1 John 5:1 Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him.

When you believe Jesus is the Christ, you are born of God. What does that mean? Christ means 'anointed One'. Jesus was God's chosen Son to come as one who told us about God, died for us to reconcile us to God, and then rule over us as God. Jesus is the Prophet, Jesus is the Priest, Jesus is the king. To believe He is the Christ is to believe He is the chosen Son of God who died for your sins, and rose again to be your Lord forever.

When you believe that initially, you are born into God's family.

John 1:12-13 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

But then as your new heart beats, you keep believing in Jesus Christ.

I've been privileged to be in the operating theatre when both of my children were born. And one of the happiest sounds to hear in that room is the little scream and cry of a new-born baby. That cry says to everyone: *life*.

Do you know, one of the signs that someone has truly been born of God is that the first cries, as it were, out of his or her mouth is "Jesus! Jesus is the Saviour! Jesus is My Saviour! Jesus bore my sins! Jesus is the Son of God, and through Him I become a child of God! God is Father!"

Sometimes I will hear somebody talk about their nature as a Christian, and I am rather disturbed, because they make it sound like they have always loved God, and recently added Jesus. "I always thought about God, and prayed to Him, and tried to obey Him, and then recently I also accepted Jesus as my Saviour." No – there is something wrong with that picture.

The biblical view of man is not that we love God before the new birth. We hate God before the new birth. We say in our hearts, "We will not have this man to rule over us." What changes matters is when we are born again – born from above.

And as your spiritual eyes open for the first time, the sign that a new heart is beating in there is a love for what God loves. Do you know what God loves more than anything else? He loves His Son. The way parents are proud of their children is but a dim reflection of how God loves His Son. God the Son perfectly and majestically expresses all that God is. God is the musical score, but Jesus is the played symphony. God is the imagined picture, but Jesus is the painted canvas. And when God the Father looks at His Son, He is supremely delighted.

So when a baby Christian is born, with God the Father as his new Father, his first action is to love

Christ, rest on Christ, trust Christ.

Matthew 16:16-17 Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

He now looks up to God, and cries out, Abba, Father.

This is not something you grow into. This is not something you slowly work your way into. Love for God begins with a miracle – the miracle of the new birth. The day you repent of your sins and look to God in Jesus Christ to reconcile you and give you new life – that day is the beginning of your love for God.

You are totally dependent on the mercy of God to love Him. God retains all the glory for knowing and loving Him. Unless God does this first, you will not love Him.

Charles Spurgeon discovered this:

When I was coming to Christ, I thought I was doing it all myself, and though I sought the Lord earnestly, I had no idea the Lord was seeking me. I do not think the young convert is at first aware of this. I can recall the very day and hour when first I received those truths in my own soul—when they were, as John Bunyan says, burnt into my heart as with a hot iron, and I can recollect how I felt that I had grown on a sudden from a babe into a man—that I had made progress in Scriptural knowledge, through having found, once for all, the clue to the truth of God. One week-night, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher's sermon, for I did not believe it. The thought struck me, How did you come to be a Christian? I sought the Lord. But how did you come to seek the Lord? The truth flashed across my mind in a moment—I should not have sought Him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to make me seek Him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, How came I to pray? I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. How came I to read the Scriptures? I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that He was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, "I ascribe my change wholly to God."

John 15:16 "You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit,

Do not for a moment compromise on this point. Do not let the fear of man mislead you into thinking that you can love God apart from the new birth. Do not pretend to call Him Father if you have not embraced His Son. There must first come your day of salvation. Your day of repentance and faith must first come, before you can love God.

Being in God's family by the new birth leads logically into John's second characteristic of true love for God, which we see in 4:20-5:2

II. You Love God Truly When You Love His Family

Look again in 5:1.

1 John 5:1 Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him.

This is the reason John has included truth about the new birth. He is explaining how it relates to loving God. The person born of God loves Him who begot. The child loves its parent. Newborn

Christians love God with the new heart they have. But then they also love him who is begotten of him. They love their siblings. They love whoever else has also been born of God.

So here is John making the case for loving God's family as being part of loving God.

First, to be brought into God's family where your new heart loves the Father and His Son, will mean that you love your brothers and sisters. It's the nature of the case. Notice he says 'everyone' who loves Him who begot also loves Him who is begotten by Him. Everyone. This is universally the case.

While very often our relationships with our physical brothers and sisters are not that good, isn't it a good illustration of this principle? Sometimes your brothers or sisters might really annoy you, or irritate you or be completely different to you. Why do you still phone them on birthdays and Christmas? Because you have the same parents. You are kin.

I cannot claim to have the supernatural vertical connection, and then deny that I have a corresponding horizontal one. I cannot own my parents and then disown my siblings. So it is in the family of God. A God-given love for God includes in it a God-given love for God's children. Second, John wants us to know it is simply impossible to love God without loving His people.

1 John 4:20 If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?

John gives us a scenario. Here is a man who comes up and makes the claim. "I Love God" "I love to sing His praises" "I'm so glad You're in my life" But then he turns around and neglects, or despises, or gossips about, or backbites, or slanders, or hurts, or in some other way spites another believer.

John doesn't hesitate: He lied. He lied about his love for God. Why? Because here he claims to be loving God by faith, across the chasm of space and time, loving the invisible God, with love welling up in his heart for God. But then he is presented with one that God loves, who is part of God's body, and made in God's image, one for whom Christ died, one in whom Christ lives, and it takes no faith to love him or her, and he refuses. Such love is fictional. John just rules this out. It isn't possible.

Love for God includes loving His family, the visible, physical manifestation of Him in this age. God wants to deliver us from thinking about loving Him in this solitary, privatised way. He wants us to know that what we do to one of the least of these little ones, we do to Him.

Here's a third reason why loving others is part of loving God.

1 John 4:21 And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.

1 John 3:23 And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.

Quite simply, God has commanded us to do so. And if you claim to love God, then one of the ways you do so is by doing the things that please Him, as we'll see. God tells me to please Him by loving His children.

How do you as a parent feel when someone shows love to your children? You take it as a kindness shown to yourself. So when God says – love all my children, and you do so, you are pleasing Him – you are loving Him.

The path to loving God rightly is always to love what God loves. Never hate what God loves. Never love what God hates. Love what he loves, and you will be well on your way to loving God truly.

So verse 2 of chapter 5 kind of summarises all this:

1 John 5:2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments.

John is taking these three – loving God, loving His people and keeping His commandments and blending them into an inseparable mix. To love God is to love His people 4:12. However, according to 5 verse 2, to love God's people is to love God. To love God is to keep His commandments, and one of His commandments is that we love His people. When we keep His commandments, it is loving not only to God, but to His people. God does not want these split apart. Don't divide up loving His Person, Loving His People and loving His Prescriptions.

This leads to the third characteristic of true love for God.

III. You Love God Truly When You Seek To Please Him

1 John 5:3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.

This is what it is to love God – that we keep His commandments. To keep means to jealously guard and protect and observe and obey. If we have a zealous attitude towards obeying God's commandments, we love God.

Why does keeping God's commandments mean we love Him? Maybe you are even uncomfortable with that thought – like loving God seems friendly and upright, while obeying seems heavy and harsh.

Turn on the average talk show, or watch a few minutes of some soap opera or romance, and you will see that the world is in love with love itself. The world loves the idea of love. The world loves to be in love. But the world does not love a love which makes demands on them, or which disciplines them, or which requires that they deny themselves. And so the world brings us a false dilemma – you either choose hard, ugly and boring duty without love, or you choose love free from all restraint and principle and discipline.

But the Bible is very clear that loving God and keeping His commandments go hand-in-hand.

John 14:15 "If you love Me, keep My commandments.

John 14:21 "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him."

John 15:10 "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

John 15:14 "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.

The reason is simple: to love God is to know Him as a person. As a person, God has wishes, a will, desires. He expresses those desires to us as commands. When we obey His commands, we are fulfilling His wishes. We are pleasing Him. And to please God is to love Him.

God's commandments are God's list of the things He likes and dislikes. And anyone who claims to love God is going to care about what God likes and dislikes. The more you love God, the more you deny yourself what you like, to please God. In fact, you gain your joy from pleasing God. Your delight becomes bringing pleasure to God.

God is not a blank line in a sentence, where we fill in whatever we want. Loving God is not a matter of just saying I love God, and doing nothing to find out what pleases Him. Loving God is knowing God as a person, and discovering what He wants and does not want.

Picture seeing a man you know with a bunch of daisies in his hand. You ask him who they're for, and he tells you they are for his wife. You smile and say, that's very kind of you. He says, "Well, I love her." "I'm sure she'll be delighted with them" you say. "Well..I don't know. But I really want to give these to her." "But she does like daisies, doesn't she?" "Well, she's never said she does. She actually prefers roses. To tell you the truth, she's allergic to daisies." "But, how can you give these to her then?" "Oh, don't be so legalistic. It's the thought that counts. What matters is how sincere I am, and the clear effort I'm making to please her."

Now what will you say to that man? You'll eventually tell him that what he thinks is love for his wife is actually pleasing self, because he is not interested in knowing what she wants.

How we need to beware of self-deception. I do not love God just when I tell my self I do. I love God in the act of obeying His Word and pleasing Him.

When I please someone I love, it is not a burden, or a heavy duty. It is my delight. One of the signs that you are growing as a Christian and loving God more truly is that you don't ask things like, "Why can't I do that? Where does it say that I cannot do that?" Instead you ask things like, "Will this thing please God? Can I glorify God by doing this? How can I bring pleasure to my Lord through this action or word or thought?"

And if that were not enough, John tells us that the commandments of God are not burdensome.

And His commandments are not burdensome.

Obeying God should not be a heavy, punishing, draining task. If it is, you can be sure we have lost sight of one of two things:

- 1) Our motive – which is to love and please God.
- 2) Our means – which is the grace of God in the Holy Spirit enabling us.

If I do what I do to please God, and I do it in the strength He supplies, it can never be burdensome.

Matthew 11:28 "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Psalms 19:7 The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.

Remember the Hebrew slave of Exodus 21. He served six years, probably doing things out of hard, crushing duty. It was perhaps burdensome for many. But if some had come to that place where they loved their master, and preferred life-long slavery to personal freedom, they could announce that publicly. And what they would be saying is – what drives me now is not the Law, but love. What pushes me now is not duty but desire. I love my master. I want to please Him.

God has many flatterers today. There are many who sing to Him, speak glowingly about Him, and claim great love for Him, who will sadly and to their shock hear those words on judgement day, I never knew you. God has kindly given us the antidote to such self-deception.

Here's how you know if you really love Me. Did it begin with a new birth, where you confessed Jesus Christ? Only if you were first loved by Me, can you love Me.

Does it continue in love for My family? They are the visible manifestation of Me; they are your siblings – loving them is loving me.

Do you actively seek to know and do My will? People who love Me love My will.

Have you been born again? Do you love the people of God? Do you love God's will and do it? If so, then you love God. If you love God, then you are one of His.