

The Greatest Commandment

1 John 4:7-12

John has restated in explicitly Christian categories the first and second greatest commandments: that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt 22:37-40; Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27).

In 4:7-12 John specifically addresses what Jesus identified as the “second” which is like the greatest commandment. It becomes clear that these two commandments are inextricably tied together. Where there is obedience to the one there will be obedience to the other. More specifically, obedience to the greatest commandment will surely bear fruit of obedience to the “second.” We see this reflected in the structure of God’s moral law (the 10 Commandments) where the first four commandments are expressions of love for God and the second six commandments are expressions of love for neighbor.

It is inconceivable for a Christian to love God without that love issuing forth in love for neighbor. To separate the two would like trying to separate the sun from its rays.

Exegetical Outline:

I. God’s Love Expressed (4:7-12)

- A. The command to love one another (4:7-10)
 - 1. Love is of God (Vs. 7a-c)
 - 2. The one who loves (Vs. 7d-e)
 - 3. The one who does not love (Vs. 8)
 - 4. God’s love revealed (Vv. 9-10)
- B. The command to love restated (4:11-12)
 - 1. God’s love is made visible in Christian love (Vv. 11-12c)
 - 2. God’s love reaches its intended goal (Vs. 12d)

Main Idea: We are commanded to love others by God whose love for us was expressed supremely in the sending of his one and only Son in the flesh for the purpose of being the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

1. We are commanded to love each other for the protection of the church.

Vv. 1-6

- The first six verses of chapter four remind us that John is battling against gnostic heresies among the early Christians. The Gnostics believed, among other things, that physical reality was wicked. Therefore they concluded that Jesus was not God incarnate but only appeared to be in the flesh for God would never stoop to taking on flesh. So John challenges the churches to identify and root out these sorts of false teachings that come from “false prophets” (vs. 1) and the “spirit of the antichrist” (vs. 3). This takes a great deal of courage and grit. And because Christians continue to struggle with their own sin, confronting and removing error can turn into something unduly harsh or even vindictive. Therefore as Christians stand watch against error they must also carefully watch over their own hearts and actions lest they fail to love one another. So, the command to love one another is as much for the protection of the church as is the command to “test the spirits” (vs. 1).

2. We are commanded to love each other because God is the true source of love.

Vv. 7-8

- John give his instructions concerning love a strong theological grounding. He begins by helping us understand that love is only properly understood by properly understanding what God is like.
- This is John's first argument in this passage for why we ought to love one another. Notice what he says, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God." This is the argument: *God Himself is the source of real love.*
- It is important therefore that we understand what love is and is not. Love is not sentiment or warm feelings or romance or sex. Love may be understood as *tangible commitment to others*. Or, *love is a commitment to another that produces action designed to benefit the other*. It is not unusual therefore for love to be costly to the one doing the loving. The feelings that are often equated with love are actually the understandable affections that are produced by such commitment.
- John is saying that love, properly understood, issues forth from God. The sort of commitment by which a person turns away from himself for the good of another is possible only if God has given the capacity for such love in the first place.

3. We are commanded to love each other because God has loved us sacrificially.

Vv. 9-11

- In addition to loving because God is the source of love, we are to love because God has manifested His love in the giving of His own Son. 'Because God has manifested His love in the giving of His own Son we are to love one another,' he argues. John is pointing to the saving action of God through His Son as revealing the true greatness of his love for us.
- Vs. 10 – "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."
- When Jesus *propitiates* it means he turns away the wrath of God satisfying its demands. That is what Jesus' death accomplished. The Son satisfied God's just demand that sin be punished so that we would receive God's mercy which, because of Jesus' death, has been objectively won on our behalf.
- Now John says, 'In light of that love, we ought to love one another.' *The measure of how we are to love one another is the Father's giving of the Son.* John is reminding us of how great is the love our Father has for us.

4. We are commanded to love each other because in doing so God's love will be made visible.

Vs. 12

- We are to love one another, also, because of the result of that love. John is saying that God's love is made visible when we love one another the way God calls us to in the Bible. And because God's love is made visible when we love one another the way we are called to love another in the Bible, *we are to love one another not only as an encouragement to one another, but as a witness to the world that God's love is true.*
- Here's the logic. John is saying in verse 12 that the unseen God who manifested Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, is also manifested when you love one another. John is making an astonishing claim. He is saying that our loving one another is a visible witness to the world of the love of God.
- This means that our love for one another has an evangelistic, missionary effect. There is an evangelistic and missionary reason for us to love like this. This is why we cannot set aside the business of addressing divisions in personal relationships in the life of the local congregation, why we cannot put ourselves first and others second in the local congregation.