

Love is Spiritual

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[0 : 00] Now you'll know if you're regular and if you've been coming to St. C's and listening to these services for the past little while, or if you're familiar with the letter, if you've read it before, that there's a lot spoken about love in this book.

I read an interesting one liner, a one line quote this week, and here it is. This person said something I thought was quite interesting. He said love is our greatest delight and love is our greatest affliction. Love's our greatest delight on the one hand and it's our greatest affliction on the other. I don't know what you think of that when you hear that. I think that resonates quite strongly with me actually. I think it's quite a true thing to say in many ways because love can be the greatest experience and I just mean love in all the different types of relationships we have.

The many different friendships or other types of relationships. Love can be the greatest thing for us. It can be a wonderful experience and it can also be the most cutting thing that we can experience.

[1 : 08] But really if you think about that, that's not because of love per se. Love is in some sense just this abstract thing. The problem of course with love is us and the problem with love is maybe we think them.

So actually the problem that we have with love sometimes is the way that we love because we are not generous or we're sinful in the way that we love.

The problem is that people that we know and want to love us, even as friends, often let us down. They don't love us in the way that we want them to. Love can be the greatest thing.

It can also be the worst thing. And it goes up and down as we go up and down and it's just a part of our life and you may even know that experience tonight.

But take that thought about the way that we can experience love and apply it even more to our relationship to God. Jesus said that the core thing for you and me to do is to love God, the heart and to love our neighbour as our self.

[2 : 19] So we talk sometimes about that vertical and that horizontal emphasis. Love God and love our neighbour. Now if you're anything like me you might find that when you think about that the question that comes to you is well how when I don't feel like it?

How do I love God when I feel cold, when I barely have time in the morning to remember Him and maybe the circumstances of my life are pretty rubbish at the moment and I don't feel like loving God.

How do I do that? And how do I love my neighbour or the person who sits next to me in the pew when I don't think they're worthy of it?

When they let me down? When I just, I'm just angry with them. When I feel life isn't so good and they haven't supported me like I want them to. How do we do that?

Because if it's up to us and if it's up to us to somehow generate love and become really loving people then we just struggle don't we?

[3 : 25] We struggle sometimes if it was all up to us. But I think this chapter is great because it helps us to start answering that question. It helps us to understand where we need to go in order to be able to love God and to be able to love our brothers and sisters.

So that's the question or the idea I want you to take with you as we go through this chapter. And we're going to look at the chapter and it's pretty obvious when you just glance at it.

It breaks down in two ways, first six verses and then the remainder of the chapter. And as I said, a lot of what we've been speaking about so far in this book has been about love but you'll notice if you just glance at your Bibles that the heading, certainly in my Bible anyway for this first chunk, the first six verses says test the spirits.

So that seems like it's kind of taken a bit of a tangent. So what I want to do is just look at that and see what John has to say about this issue of the spirit, particularly the Holy Spirit. And then look at the second section which has to do with love again and then see how the two sections tie together because they're not unrelated.

They go together very, very closely. First section, test the spirits.

[4 : 42] What's the message that John is saying here that the Holy Spirit wants to bring to us? Because that's what John is concerned with here. He starts by talking about spirits with a small s and he's talking about if you think about types of teaching or the message given out by different groups.

What he says is you'll see in verse three, every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. He's highlighting something that he thinks the Christians he's writing to need to be careful of. So he remember that this is written in a context of the Christians needing support and encouragement because their faith is under attack.

They're in a community, in a situation where there are false teachers you could say, people would call them secessionists. They've come out of the church and they're saying, you in the church, you've got it wrong.

You should listen to us. We've got the right teaching. And their teaching, John is saying, will lead them all over the place. Dangerous.

[5 : 48] He says, watch out for that teaching. What they're saying is that Jesus is not the Son of God. So he counteracts that by saying this in verse two.

So you can see there in verse two. This is how you can recognize the spirit of God. So he's highlighting for the believers in this first chapter how they can recognize what the spirit would teach them.

Well, what is the message that the Holy Spirit would say to them? Well, verse two, the Holy Spirit would say, this is how you can recognize the spirit of God. Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.

He's talking about the incarnation. He's talking about the fact that in history, God acted and sent his son, Jesus, who came took on flesh and he came.

And by introducing this, he's also talking about all that would be implied by that. So they are to believe that Jesus Christ came.

[6 : 44] And John, of course, would affirm that he came in order to be the Savior for them. So it wasn't insignificant what he's talking about, that Jesus came and that they're to remember this and go on holding firm to that core teaching.

That's the core teaching that the Holy Spirit would testify to. So this is the emphasis that he's looking to bring out at this point. And as I've said, you know, he emphasizes this because of the dangerous situation they're in.

They're a vulnerable community with this false teaching that would chip away at them all the time saying, are you wrong? You don't need to believe that. You're wrong. You don't need to believe that stuff about Jesus being the Son of God. That's, you know, today we might hear a lot of people say, that's so out of fashion.

That's just been ridiculed for 300 years. You don't need to listen to that anymore. But the message to us would be the same. Jesus who came in the flesh is the Son of God who is our Savior.

And so that's the emphasis that they were to take and that we're to take. And of course, if you remember back from some of the sermons that we've had, he's looking to defend the faith and he's looking to, as it were, rebuff this false teaching.

[7 : 57] But he's also looking, he's thinking pastorally because he wants to give assurances to the believers. He wants them to be built up in their faith. This is in a sense the last of the different types of assurances he gives.

Let me just remind you, chapter 2 verse 3, chapter 2 verse 3, we know that we have come to know him. He uses this language quite a few times. You'll notice it when you go through the book.

We know that we are. In other words, you can be assured of your faith if we obey his commands.

And if you remember that, the importance of following.

It does matter how we live. Some of the false teachers would say, don't worry how you live. It doesn't matter. No, he says, it does matter. So that's one thing.

Another one in chapter 3, if I just read in verse 10, here's another assurance. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are.

[8 : 55] Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God, nor is anyone who does not love his brother. So he was also saying, you have to see the centrality of the kind of love that comes from the gospel that should be at work amongst you as a community.

And this is something that we'll go on to see more. In other words, if you say, yeah, we're Christians and we believe in God and then you hate each other, that doesn't make any sense. So obedience and love.

And then at the very last verse then in chapter 3, he talks about the Holy Spirit. This is another assurance. In the second half of chapter 3, verse 24, he says, this is how we know that he lives in us.

We know it by the spirit he gave us. The work of the spirit. Very important, John wants to emphasize to these people. And that's what he's kind of building on into chapter 4 where we're at just now. And so he doesn't want them to think, well, okay, the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit's teaching is something that is personal to me and I can kind of interpret however I want. Some people might say, oh, the spirit led me to do this or the spirit led me to do whatever.

[10 : 06] But John is very clearly saying to them here, the work of the Holy Spirit is to testify it's to say Jesus and to remind people of all that Jesus has done.

So in other words, it's grounded in the truth of what God has done for his people. That's John's deliberate emphasis to these people at the start of this chapter to remind them of the gospel. That's what the gospel is to be assured of Jesus. Jesus himself said that this is what the Holy Spirit would do. Let me just read a couple of verses from John's gospel.

Jesus is recorded in chapter 15 as saying, when the counselor comes, now the counselor was our name that was used of the Holy Spirit, the one who would minister to them and teach them.

When the counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. So that's what Jesus said to his disciples.

[11 : 08] That's what they should expect that the Holy Spirit would testify in his absence, in his physical absence. The Holy Spirit would testify about Jesus. And he says also in John chapter 16, but when he, the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.

Because it matters that the Christians stay on track. It really matters to God, to Jesus, the Savior who came, that after he ascended back to heaven, people didn't just kind of veer off on all kinds of tangents.

And so he sent his spirit to convict people of the truth. So there's more we could go into in this section, but I'm not going to this not time. The first section is to remind them of this truth about Jesus and the gospel.

That's the clear theme that's coming through here. Now the second section from verse 7 onwards, again in my Bible, the heading is God's love and ours.

So you might think, well, I've had a few sermons on 1st John now. When we were in chapter 3, it was about love for the most part. A lot of the emphasis in chapter 5 was about love.

[12 : 20] The second half of chapter 4 is about love. So what's this section at the start of chapter 4 about testing the spirits? That seems to be a bit of a diversion. Doesn't fit to a slight tangent from the rest of the emphasis of the book.

Well it's not and I hope to come on and see how it's not and how key that passage at the start of chapter 4 is. But just for now, let's spend a bit of time following the emphasis that John now goes to which is back to his theme of love.

What does he say in this chapter about love? First thing I want you to see is that it talks a lot about community love. Community love.

Just a few verses to draw this out. Verse of all, verse 7, dear friends, let us love one another. That's quite clear, isn't it?

Let's love one another. It's important to join. Verse 11, dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. So let us love one another.

[13 : 20] We ought to love one another. Verse 12, no one's ever seen God but if we love one another. Now that's not if like, maybe we could love one another.

That's kind of like, if we love one another then it's presuming that we love one another. Verse 19, like over the page, we love because he first loved us.

You can see the way he writes. It's just assumed that this community will love one another. We love because he first loved us. And then the final one I just picked out is in verse 20 where he almost shows the flip side if you like, he says verse 20, if anyone says I love God, yet hates his brother, he's a liar.

So in other words, he's saying it's inconceivable that we wouldn't love, that there wouldn't be a core connection of love at the heart of the Christian community.

Community love is very important to John. This love looks like, what does it look like? It's, this is particularly as we've already mentioned as we've been going through this passage.

[14:28] This is about the fellowship of believers. So the Bible encourages us to love our neighbor. So our attitude towards those we live next to and we work next to and we study next to should be one of love and we should love people because of the gospel.

But the particular emphasis here is the family of Christ, the Christian community. And it's the type of love that will cost you.

It's not a kind of, I love my brothers and sisters and now I'm going to forget about them for the rest of the week. It's the kind of love that will make a difference to your week and to the way that you interact with people at your city groups and whether or not you have a better time that you can spare to go and help somebody who you know is in need this week.

So it's a real love that makes a difference in community now. When I was a teacher, if I was teaching the kids, I used to teach English.

If I was teaching about a novel or about a play and I was teaching, trying to teach a bunch of second year kids how to read a play or a novel.

[15:43] One of the things you would say that you need to look out for is the point of conflict in a story, in a book. So in other words, what happens in that book or play or if you go to the theater and you watch a production, what happens that causes the drama?

Something's got to happen. Otherwise, all you do is you have a book that exists with people getting up, going to bed, getting up, going to bed. Nothing really happens. Boring. You don't want to read that. So in a book, something will happen that will create tension.

That will bring two people together in a particular way that will cause, I don't know, families to be at war. And out of that comes the drama and the tension.

Now also, it's interesting, when you read a novel or a play, you might hate novels or plays, but just imagine for a minute. If you read a story, if you read a book, that kind of point of conflict also happens as we read.

As we read a book, our worldviews are challenged. What we think about things could be challenged by the book that we read. We can learn something we've never learned before and it can make a big difference to us.

[16:50] Or we can become really angry with a book if we disagree with it. Or it can affirm something that we really believe. And so we really interact with the book. Now of course, if we take the Bible and it makes no difference to our lives when we read it, if it just flows over our heads and we're unruffled by it, then there's probably something wrong.

Because in our sinfulness, as we struggle with our sin on an ongoing basis, as we come to God's word, it should and it does confront us.

It's His truth speaking into our life. And so it affects us at a core level in terms of who we are on our daily basis.

Now I mention that because when I read a section like the one we've just done that talks about community love that is costly, that is ongoing, that's time consuming and that is expected, I think back to the question we were thinking about at the start, how can I do that?

I often, I struggle with that. And sometimes I think when we read a passage like this, we can just, we can become guilty. We think, I'm just so poor at that.

[18:08] This week I had just nothing to give people. I didn't love and it makes us feel guilty. And if you're anything like me, then your response sometimes might be to think, right, this week I'm going to love better.

In my city group, I'm going to care for people. I'm going to make people meals or whatever it looks like in your life. And the problem with that of course is that when it's just up to us to kind of work up a sense of love for people, we can so often let ourselves down, let alone let other people down.

I mean it's good to challenge ourselves and it's good to think about the way that we interact with our communities and it's good to want to love more and to care for people.

But how do we do it? We often find it so hard and we often find that our selfishness or our indifference is right there along with our best intentions. And so there's that conflict, the tension that we have, the challenge that we have when we read a passage like this.

So the key then is not only to read this and see the community love that's emphasized but to see the love of God. And that's where we have to start. Because John wants the people he's writing to to have a clear view of the way that God loves them and for us tonight.

[19 : 31] So how does that come out? Just in closing. God's love in these last few things. First of all, verse 7 again, verse 7 and 8.

Love starts with God. It's not something that we just make up or work up ourselves. Verse 7, dear friends, let us love one another.

For love comes from God. So we've been thinking, Derek's been preaching on the attributes of God. What's God like? Well, he is love. It's one of the key things about God.

We could preach a whole sermon on God is love. But you know, it doesn't just remain as a kind of abstract thing because God's love is in action always.

But that's the next thing. Look at verse 10, chapter 4 verse 10. This is love. So he says, here's what it looks like.

[20 : 27] This is love. Not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. So John says, remember what God's love is like.

It looks like this. It looks like Jesus leaving heaven and taking on humanity, the incarnation, which is what he was emphasizing in the first few verses and becoming the one who saves you.

His love is active. In other words, God doesn't say, I am loving and you all should be too, like me. He doesn't say, I'm really good at loving. So come on, all of you, if you try these seven steps, you can maybe become as loving as me.

He wants us to love, but he wants us to first understand that he loved us. He is love and he loved us.

[21 : 26] Jesus says, I love you and I will save you and I will act to save you. So God's love starts with him and is active.

And then just the final thing in two amazing verses, verse 12, first of all, number 17, two things about God's love.

No one has ever, verse 12, no one has ever seen God. But if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. That's an amazing phrase.

His love is made complete in us. Some translations will say his love is perfected or made perfect in us. And you'll see that comes up again in verse 17.

In this way, love is made complete among us. Love is made complete. What does that mean? Well, it doesn't mean that God's love comes in this way and we come along this way with all of our greatness and somehow kind of complete God's love as if God's love needs us to be complete.

[22 : 30] He's not saying that, but what he's saying is that God's love always is to be active and to be at work amongst you and me so that it changes us, so that it affects within us.

It has an effect. Again, it's not an abstract thing that we can just kind of look at every so often and think about. For the believer, we're saved and we're changed and we're made more like Jesus. What a blessing for us. Now thinking back to that question that we started with, how do I love God? How do I love my neighbour?

I think if you think about our natural inclination towards God and towards our neighbour, our natural inclination towards God can often be fear. And what I mean by fear is that when we stand in our imperfection before a perfect holy God and recognise our imperfection and His perfection, we fear if we're thinking straight because we recognise how...

You think of Isaiah that I was mentioning in a sermon a couple of weeks ago about Isaiah. When Isaiah was confronted by the vision of God, what was his reaction but to fall on his face? That example of Peter in Luke's Gospel, I think, where he sees the power of Jesus at work and a medical he does, his response is to say, go away from me.

[23 : 59] We fear because we recognise that we deserve punishment. We recognise that we deserve punishment. And that is in some ways our instinctive dynamic when we come before God.

And also with regard to our brothers and sisters in our community, what's our natural reaction?

Well, we might like to say we love each other at a human level even.

But maybe that goes so far as to say, well, I'm not in a good mood anymore, so I'm done loving or that person's really offended me. So I'm done loving them. Our love goes so far.

So our natural inclination towards people can be enmity, that sense of tension that corrupts our relationships and breaks them down. How does this message change that?

How does the Gospel that John is getting his listeners to focus on deal with those issues? We see that in the two verses I've just picked out.

[25 : 00] Verse 12, first of all, no one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. How is his love completed in us with regards to one another?

Well, it helps us to love each other. And he says, as we do this, God lives in us. Let's stop and think about that for a minute.

As we love one another because of the Gospel, he lives in us. That's a transforming, powerful truth. And it shows us what we're made for. And in verse 17, remember I was saying that our natural inclination often when we stand before God is to just fear.

Now, in a sense, that's right because when we recognize who we are before God and because of our sin, there is that sense of fear because he is a holy God and he's the judge of all the earth.

[25 : 58] But look at what the Gospel brings. Verse 17, in this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment.

And he goes on to say at the start of verse 18, there is no fear in love. So that if you're in the Gospel now and one day when Christ will return, you can stand before him and not fear because of the Gospel.

And so you're at peace with God because of what Christ has done for you, because of all that Jesus has done and because of the Gospel.

And so we see as we start to work through the second section on love, how our initial questions were, I hope, answered to a large degree.

The battle remains for us. It's a daily one to love the Lord and to love our neighbour as ourselves. But where do we start? You get up tomorrow and just try harder and try and be a more loving person.

[27 : 05] It's good to take stock and it's good to be determined. But we must start with going back to God's love and to the Gospel and to the way in which when we understand that, we're able to say, God loves me and he acted to save me.

And he acted to save my brothers and sisters who I sat next to in the pew last night. And so he loves them. So I will love them because of the Gospel.

And so in some senses, this is the old truth, isn't it, that we never go beyond the Gospel. And this issue of love and how we love starts with that issue of the Gospel. And it also helps us see how these two sections tie together.

I don't know if you ever, you hear people talking about doctrine, you think. I don't do all that theological high stuff, doctrine. I think of doctrine as in teaching, as in the truth.

What John is trying to emphasize in this first six verses, when we were saying is the truth, the core teaching about Jesus. How is that relevant to what comes next? Well, it's absolutely relevant.

[28 : 17] Because as we remember who Jesus was and what he did for you and me, then we remember the incarnation that he came.

Then we remember the atonement that he died for our sins. And then we remember that he did this because he loved us. And then we're set free in order to love.

And that is the greatest blessing, the greatest blessing for us as a Christian community. As people many years later who are able to look at this teaching and apply it to themselves. So exactly what that looks like for you this week.

I don't know and that's something that we have to apply for ourselves, but we have to start with the gospel and what Christ has done for us.

And in many ways we never get beyond that. Now I'm going to pray in just a minute and shortly we're going to celebrate together the Lord's Supper. And we're going to remember as a family all that he has done for us.

[29 : 20] And just before we do that, I'm going to look at, I never looked at the last two verses. I'm going to look very briefly at those two verses. But just before we sing, just to say that as we sing now, as we stand and sing again, if you are a member here and if you're a believer and if you're a Christian, this isn't just a free church celebration.

So if you're a believer in Christ Jesus, we welcome you. Then if you could maybe there's plenty of space just in the middle, if you move into the center and we'll celebrate the supper together.

And maybe those who are, we have the joy of having some new members tonight. So if you're a new member, if you could sit down the front, that would be great.

If you happen to be sitting in the middle and you find it, we're passing around the cups, the wine and the bread and please don't feel you have to kind of scarp, just pass them on.

There's no problem with you sitting there. But this is a time for us to be quiet and to remember and to celebrate. And so I'm just going to pray and then we're going to sing.

[30 : 24] So let's just bow our heads and pray. Father, we praise you now for the gospel. Thank you for the teaching in the Bible. We thank you that it draws us to our Savior Jesus and that we can now sing your praise and we can remember you in the supper.

We pray that you be present amongst us in Jesus' name.