The Love of God
1 John 4:7-13
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This morning we come to the conclusion of our series looking at God's attributes. God's attributes are the things God has revealed to us about who He is. Over the course of this series I have tried to focus in on some of God's central attributes – if you could call them that – thought in many ways that is futile effort because all of God's attributes are just as real and just as important as all the other ones. God doesn't have small attributes and big attributes.

And so in this study we have examined God's justice and His wrath which are just as important and just as central as his mercy and grace. Indeed we can only get an understanding of one of God's attributes by looking at His others and seeing how they relate to each other.

And so today we are looking at the Love of God and the text we are examining can be found in 1 John 4 – please turn there with me. It's on page 863 in your pew Bible if you didn't bring your own.

As you will notice, in this series I have titled all the sermons "God is love" and then continued to talk about whatever attribute we were discussing that week. I was hoping someone would question me on that, but you are all just so polite that nobody brought it up – or else perhaps it made perfect sense to you – I don't know.

Anyway, the reason I prefaced this series with this small phrase is the fact that "God is love" sums up all of His attributes – everything we know about God. Actually a few of God's attributes do this in certain ways. You may remember several weeks back we looked at God's goodness and we concluded that this attribute was a lens through which we see all God's other attributes. So God's faithfulness is good, and His wrath is good and His mercy is good and His justice is good.

And the love of God functions in a similar way in that if you boiled the entire story of salvation down to one word the word would be "love". And today I want to look at how we can say "God is love" and what that means. Let's look at our text.

[Read 1 John 4:7-13]

Definitions:
The word "love" comes up 13 times in these seven verses – it's obviously the theme of what John is talking about here.

But love, as it turns out is more difficult a word to define than we may think. So quickly let's look at what this word means and then move on to look at our text.

Love as it appears in this text is the word *agape*, or *agapao* as it appears in verb form. It is a word that if you have been in church for any period of time you will be familiar with, and yet it is a word with many meanings.

It can mean benevolent kindness, or heat-felt compassion, but as a verb it literally means "to give yourself over to something, totally committing yourself to it."[1] So the things we love are the things we put first in our lives.

And here is where we come back to a theme that has come up over and over again in this series. Whenever we give ourselves over to anything that is not God, regardless of whether it is a good thing like family or health, we commit idolatry. In Matthew 6 Jesus says:

> "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other." (Matthew 6:24)

So the question hits us today, what have you given yourself over to? Are you someone who *agapao's* God, someone who is totally given over to God and His glory? Is that what your life is focused on? Or have you given yourself over to something less? Jesus says "The human heart only has room for only one *agapao* love."

Ok so that's the Greek definition of this word, but how do we relate this to the love we experience on a day to day level?

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> "We just don't love each other anymore. We have grown apart and we both agree that it is time for us to part ways." Or "He loves himself way more than he loves me or the kids. I can't tolerate his selfishness anymore, I'm out of here."

These are familiar words to us, we have all heard people we know say them – perhaps some of us have said these words ourselves.

Love at a human level is a fickle thing. With the divorce rate approaching 50% even for those within the church our experience is that love comes and goes. It sweeps us off our feet and then it disappears.

Urbandictionary.com is a dictionary that anyone can contribute to on the internet. After you write a definition your definition gets ranked by how many people agree with you and vote for you. The result is words are defined by popular opinion.

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[1] Taken from Missler, Nancy's work found at http://www.fillthevoid.org/ChristianGrowth/NMWhatdoesitmeantoloveGod.html

If you look up the word "love" the definition with the most agreement, over 37000 likes, gives this definition. Love is "The most spectacular, indescribable, deep, euphoric feeling for someone." Sounds like fun right! But no matter how strong and indescribable it is, love defined like this is a feeling. And of course that is why it comes and goes as quickly as it does.

But not everyone thinks this way.

In response to viewing love as a feeling the phrase "love is a verb", made popular recently by Musician John Mayer, has entered colloquial language. The idea here is that love is something we do, not just something we feel. And that works well with the Greek word *agapao* we looked at, but it's still not the total picture. In our text today we see something even more powerful than this – we see love as a noun, a physical thing, and this is the word *agape*, *agapao* is a verb, but *agape* is a person place or thing, it's a noun – but more on that in a second.
…
Ok so turning back to our text there are at least three questions that these verses require us to ask of them. First, what is love as it relates to God? Second, what does God's love look like, and finally, how do we love God?

1.) So let's start with the first question: **What is love as it relates to God?**
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Ok, look at our text. Here in the English we just get the world love, loved or loves some 13 times. But as we have already said, in the Greek there are two different words for love used here, neither of them are the feeling word that our culture understands. One of them is the verb *agapao* and the other is the noun *agape*.

Now, if you are someone who writes in your Bibles this is a good time to do it, so grab a pen or pencil because in English we can't see this, but it is really important to the meaning of this text.

I am going to read this paragraph again starting in verse 7, but instead of the word love I am going to say "verb" or "noun".

If I say "verb" put brackets around the word love, and if I say "noun" then underline it. Ok.

[Read 1 John 4:7-12]

Ok so look with me at verse 7. "Dear friends, let us (do the action of loving) one another, [why?] for (this thing called love) comes from God… and then verse 8 [in fact] God is (this thing called love)." How is it that God actually ***is*** this thing called love as well as love is an action that ***comes*** from God?

Let me give you a picture. The sun in our solar system is like God's noun love. It is a thing, a huge ball of hot burning gas. And the sun gives off heat and light. And the heat and light it gives off is like God's verb love – His action of love. It goes out from the sun and it does things, it makes things grow. But the heat and light that the sun gives off, it isn't a physical thing – thankfully not much burning gas makes it to earth, but it is consistent with the physical sun, because the sun's very nature is a ball of exploding gas. Heat and light is what the sun is. It does something that is consistent with what it is.

And so in the same way God's noun love, which we could call His character or His attribute gives off His verb love out of His very nature.

So what is love as it relates to God? First, it's a thing, it's His very nature and substance, it is what He is. And then it is an action that comes to us out of the very core of what He is.

2.) Ok, let's look at our second question: **What does God's love look like?** Especially what does God's noun love look like?

Look with me at verse 9

[Read 1 John 4:9]

The physical thing that is God's love shows itself to us by God sending Jesus into the world so that we might live. We see the noun love of God because the verb love of God shines on us. And just like we wouldn't be able to see the sun if it didn't give off light – if our sun was a black hole we wouldn't be able to see it because it wouldn't give anything off. All we would see was a black hole. But the noun love of God is made visible to us through the verb love of God which shines on us through the action of Jesus bringing us life.

I know it's a bit to get your mind around, I'm scared to ask but does that make sense? A bit?

Now look at verse 10

[Read 1 John 4:10]

This is it folks, this is the gospel; this is why the noun love of God sums up everything we know about God. It all comes down to this word "atoning sacrifice" as the NIV says or as some other translations put it God's "propitiation".

Now "propitiation" is a big word, but if you are a Christian it's an incredibly important word to understand.

Try it on for size. Everyone repeat after me "propitiation", one more time "propitiation"

Good, now when you are at Starbucks later this week try it out on your friend, just say to them "so, how is Christ's propitiation working itself out in your life this week?" They are going to think you are a genius.

But in all seriousness this word is incredibly important because it defines the noun love of God and it sums up everything we have looked at in this series to date.

And here is what it means:

Propitiation is "the turning away of God's wrath by a perfect sacrifice."[2]

And here is what that means in a nutshell.

Romans 3 tells us "we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike (so everyone) are all under the power of sin. As it is written: 'There is no one righteous not even one'." (Romans 3:9-10)

This means that all of us are sinners.

And when we looked at the holiness of God we saw that God is totally separate from sin. He can not stand to be around it. But because He is infinite and therefore everywhere He can't hid from it so His justice demands that all human sin be punished.

Romans 2 says "God will repay each person according to what they have done." (Romans 2:6)

And as God looks down at sinful humanity, people who refuse to give Him the glory and thanks He is worthy of, His wrath boils up towards us.

And He concludes that the only punishment that could pay for the sin of rebellion that festers in each of our hearts is for us to die – both physically on earth and eternally in hell. Romans 6:23 tells us "The wages of sin is death"

This is justice, and this is the goal of God's wrath.

But God is good: 2 Peter tells us "He is not wishing that any should perish" (2 Peter 3:9) He wants all of us to experience the ultimate good we were designed for from the beginning, which is communion with Himself – He wants us to live with Him and in Him. But to do this His wrath must be appeased and our sin must be paid for.

Now God can't just forgive and forget because that wouldn't be justice. Just like Jerry Sandusky, the retired Pennsylvania State football coach can't be forgiven for the 45 charges of sexual child abuse he was just convicted of. Justice demands payment.

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[2] Adapted from Elwell's "Evangelical Dictionary of Theology" – *propitiation*

And so God had to make another way. And that way is propitiation. "God Himself provided the means of [paying for our sin and] removing His own wrath"[3] from us.

Though it cost Him everything, by taking our place of the cross "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21). In His mercy Jesus took away from us the punishment we rightfully deserved, and in His grace He gave us the righteousness we had no right to have.

Friends this action of propitiation <u>is what the love of God looks like</u> – God turned away His own wrath by providing a perfect sacrifice for us when He sent Himself to take our place and die on the cross. That is what the love of God looks like.

3.) And this leads us to our last question: **How do we love God?**

In Matthew 22 Jesus tells us

"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-39)

But now that we have seen what the love of God looks like, the absolute extreme example of self sacrifice in the entire universe, we need to know what to do with this.

I mean how can we possibly love God back in the way He loved us, and really how are we even capable of loving one another with the kind of love He has demonstrated for us?

John breaks this down for us in verse 10.

[Read 1 John 4:10a]

Two things, first of all it isn't about us loving God at all. It is about God loving us. Because what kind of actions could we possibly do to love as a verb God?

As Protestants we think that we love God by coming to church and reading our Bibles and praying. Now these are all good things, but actually the Bible never tells us to do these things and it certainly doesn't tell us that this is how we love God. So how do we do it? Look at verse 12…

"No one has ever seen God" – God is invisible. Again, what kind of actions can you possibly do to show love to an invisible God? He doesn't need anything

Verse 12 continues:

"But if we love (as a verb) one another, God lives in us and His (noun) love is made complete in us."

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[3] Elwell "Evangelical Dictionary of Theology" - *propitiation*

The physical action we do to show that we love God is that we love one another. And John says when we do this, this is the evidence that God lives in us and His love, the noun love of God, is made complete in us.

Now, notice we don't love our neighbours in order for God to live in us – that would be works righteousness. But rather if we love our neighbours this is the evidence that God's Love lives in us already.

Now this is mind blowing. The ability for us to love each other and therefore God is because God's noun love is in us. When we become Christians and God comes and makes His home within us then we are able to love our neighbours with the same love Jesus had when He laid down his life for us.

God does the supernatural work of placing this thing within us, His noun Love, and when He does this we are able to do the verb love of God to our neighbours.

So what is this thing, this physical noun love that God puts within us that becomes the supernatural force enabling love as a verb to pour out of us?

Look with me at verse 13.

[Read 1 John 4:13]

Our connection to being in God and Him being in us is the Spirit – the Holy Spirit. Back at the beginning of this series we looked at the mystery of the Trinity. The idea that somehow in a way that we can never fully get our minds around God, who is one exists in three persons – Father, Son and Spirit. And we described the relationship within the Trinity as a dance of shyness as each one prefers the other and points away from themselves.

And we are invited into this dance as God that Father puts God the Spirit within our bodies.

Pastor John Piper describes it like this:

> The Son of God was not created… He has always existed as God, eternally begotten by the Father. The mystery of God's nature is that there is God the Father and God the Son from all eternity and that the relationship between them has existed from all eternity and is part of God's nature.
>
> This relationship is love and this love carries the perfections of the Father and the Son so fully that it too is God, God the Holy Spirit. God the Father has always had a perfect living image of himself—God the Son. And God the Father and God the Son have always had an infinite living Spirit of love between them—God the Holy Spirit.[4]

[4] John Piper http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/love-one-another-for-love-is-of-god

So, the noun love of God, is actually a thing. Or more accurately the noun love of God is a person – the Holy Spirit. And the evidence that the Holy Spirit lives within us, as verse 12 says, is that we love one another like Jesus has loved us. It is the Spirit within us that makes this possible.

And so the question how "do we love God is really the wrong question."

We don't verb love God at all we love God because we have the Spirit of God within us – we share in the *agape* relationship of love with the Father and the Son. As verse 10 says, it's not about us loving God it is about God verb-loving us and putting Himself, His noun Love within us. That is the reality of Love we live in friends.

And how do we know we live in this reality? The evidence is that we are a people who love one another.
…
Would you please stand with me as we close this series in prayer.

So here we find ourselves, face to face with the mystery of the Triune God Himself.

God, You are love, You are holy, You are just, You are good, and You are wrathful, You are jealous, You are faithful, You are merciful, You are gracious… You are God.

And this morning you are worthy of our worship. You alone are worthy of our *agapao* love and so we give ourselves totally over to You. And yet in Your mercy convict us of those areas in our lives where we still give ourselves over to other things. In Your grace put Your Spirit of *agape* Love within us we pray and cause us to love one another.

We are Your children, we long to be with You and in You. We pray this in the mighty name of Your Son. Amen.