



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Easter 5

May 2, 2021

Because He First Loved Us

1 John 4:1–21

¹ Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. ⁴ Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. ⁵ They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 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. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have beheld and bear witness that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ And we have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ¹⁷ By this, love is perfected with us, that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. ¹⁹ We love, because He first loved us. ²⁰ If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. ²¹ And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

When looking over the vast landscape of religious thought in our world, you might be tempted to conclude that there are more religions today than we could ever possibly count. But would it surprise you to know that there are really only *two*? There are all those



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man-made religious systems that in one way or another promote the notion that salvation – however it's defined – is obtained through the efforts of their adherents, and then there's Christianity.

Christianity stands apart from all the rest primarily because it isn't man-made; it was born of God, not of men. And it doesn't mainly speak of what we humans do for God, but, rather, what God does for us, for it reveals to us God's Son, whom He sent into the world to restore it and its inhabitants by His truly limitless love. This concept alone should lead everyone to realize that this is a religion like no other. For Christianity makes but one single demand of its followers: believe and trust in the love of God, shown to us in His Son. Christianity is truly a religion of love, and not, mind you, primarily of our love for God or our love for each other, but His love for us – the grace that gives us the faith to cling to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This central truth is revealed in the words of St. John as he tells us that "God is love." But, someone might ask: Isn't it also true that God is righteousness, omnipotence, omniscience; omnipresence, eternity, and so on? Yes, but the most Godlike thing about God is love. Love is His motivation, love is His *modus operandi*, love is His very essence. God *is* love.

Many a theologian knows a great deal about doctrine and is capable of telling you more about God than I can, but they don't all know God because some don't know that, whatever else He is, He is, first and foremost, love. Many a Lutheran child has emerged from Catechism class and proceeded through the rite of Confirmation knowing a great deal *about God*, yet without really *knowing* God, because he hasn't realized that God is, above all else, love. No matter what we learn about God, we can't know God without an understanding of God's love.

But what is there to understand about God's love? Was it God's love that caused Him to create the universe with all its stars and planets? Was it God's love that caused Him to create mankind to be the crown of that universe? Yes, that's all true. But, that's still looking at God's love with blurred vision. His love comes into focus only when we see it through the cross. The greatest manifestation of God's love is seen in the incarnation and redemptive work of Jesus.

John writes in verse nine of our text: "This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him." Jesus is the living Evidence, the everlasting Demonstration of God's love. We see Him in Gethsemane, in the palace before Pilate, even on the cross at Golgotha, suffering . . . for whom? The righteous? Those who loved Him? Those who deserved it? No! He was suffering for those who hated Him. He died for those who beat Him in the face and mocked Him. He died for the man who tore the flesh off His back with the cat of nine tails. He died for those who drove the nails into His hands and feet, for the one who pierced His side. For those He died . . . and for you and me. He died for us when we had no use for Him. He died for us when we cursed Him and foully blasphemed His name. He died for us when we hated



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everything He loves. That's how far reaching, how holy, how pure His love is.

He loves us enough never to give up on us. He persistently calls us to follow Him. He reveals to us, as He did to Peter and Judas, the patience He has for those who go astray. He begs us to repent like Peter and not to despair like Judas. He longs for us to learn, as Peter learned, that forgiveness is always there for us. As He gave mercy to the publican and the harlot, He gives mercy to you and me, and with mercy comes peace and healing. All this He has for you, beloved. This kind of love abides for you.

And all you have to do is receive the love He offers. But know this: with that love comes a little surprise. Those of us who have truly received His love know the meaning of this little rhyme:

Children of God this lesson have learned:
His love truly taken is always returned.

God's love, without fail, yields a response. In the receivers of His love there's an answering love. Those of us who have received His love do truly love Him. John tells us where our love for God comes from: "We love Him because He first loved us." It's not that we withheld our love until He decided to love us, but, rather that He has, through His love, given us the ability to love. Without grace this is impossible, because it's the nature of sinful man not to love God, but to fear and hate Him. By nature there's something desperately wrong with our relationship to God. Sin has separated us from Him, and for that reason the relationship which should be our greatest source of joy has become our source of deepest dread. Thank God for His grace that reconciles us, that washes us, that frees us from our sin, and allows us to stand before Him cleansed, purified, and made holy. Thank God as well for the gift of faith which allows us to receive the love and forgiveness His grace has made available to us. Thank God He's given us the ability to love Him as He first loved us.

And when we realize where our love for God comes from, we begin to understand why this love revolutionizes our lives. This love, born of grace, received through faith, underlies all our Christian attitudes and activities. Take prayer, for instance. Even those who are not Christians pray. But, prayer, in the Christian sense, is the constant, habitual, on-going communication between the child of God and his heavenly Father. This kind of prayer is only possible for those who love God in Christ. "We love Him" – and therefore we pray to Him – "because He first loved us." Is that why you pray? Or is prayer merely a last ditch effort for you, sort-of, "when all else fails – pray"? If you don't find joy and happiness in the privilege of prayer it might be that you've either forgotten or never known the true meaning of God's love in your life.

Or what about worship? Why do we worship God? Why do we sing our songs of praise? Why do we gladly hear and learn His Word? Why do we come together in God's house to pray, praise, and give thanks? Is it because we're driven by fear? Is it because



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we're compelled to by a sense of duty? Is it because of the recognition we receive from other people? Whatever *your* reason, Christians worship God because we love God, and we love Him because He first loved us.

All that is real and true in the Christian life is a consequence of the love of God. This is true in our relationships with one another, as well. John says: "He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother." Through the Apostle Paul our Lord has taught us that "love is the fulfilling of the Law" (Rom. 13:10). All the sins that disturb our human relationships – greed, pride, lust, dishonesty, covetousness, hatred, envy, and so on – arise out of a lack of love for one another. Our failure to help and befriend our neighbor, our failure to love and honor our parents, our failure to help our neighbor to improve and protect his property and business, etc. – these all betray our failure to love one another as God has loved us.

These days, a lot of people don't seem to have a problem hating their neighbor. They say, "Why should I love them? I don't even like them!" Or they'll say, "Why should I help him? He's a creep!" Even those of us who see a problem with that have difficulty at times responding to certain people in a godly way. My natural reaction to someone who's wronged me is to wish him evil. I'm no different than you in that regard. By nature we're all inclined to love those who love us and hate those who hate us. So, you can't achieve brotherly love simply by thinking it's a good idea. But, when God gives us His love, He gives us the ability, not only to love Him in return, but also to love our neighbor.

Beloved, do you have enemies? Are there people with whom you don't get along? Are there people who hate you? Pray for them. Pray that God will give them a true understanding of His love, a true understanding of His forgiveness, so that he or she will be freed from the bondage of hate and fear, free to love as they are loved by God. Pray that God's love will free you and enable you to love them.

God grant that His love would bind us together as we pray for one another and give us a true love for Him and a true love for our neighbor. In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.