

When, How, Where, and Why God Loved Us First

1 John 4:19-21

July 6 & 7, 2013
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We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:19-21 ESV)

We are in the final laps of our series in 1 John. And kind of like watching the final laps of a NASCAR race, in 1 John, these laps can look and sound a lot like the earlier ones. Like a race on an oval track, John writes in a circular fashion. And like a NASCAR race, the basics remain the same even as there are some changes in the order and the emphasis later in the letter.

Our passage this weekend is like the passage last weekend. It's a repetition of earlier teaching with one golden nugget of truth. Last week that truth was verse 18, *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear*. We saw how love and fear are mutually exclusive and how all our fears are rooted in an ultimate fear and uncertainty about the future and eternity. God's perfect love for us, displayed on the cross and assured through his promises, removes the big future fear and can calm all our present ones as well. He loves us perfectly and will do so eternally. Christians, what do we really have to be afraid of? *Perfect love casts out fear*.

Our treasure truth for this week is "*We love because he first loved us.*" (1 John 4:19) Before we get to that, let's see a few new emphases John adds to familiar teachings. The main truth he is developing here is a social test of genuine salvation, do I love my brother or not?

Here he shows the hypocrisy of saying "I love God" (verse 20) and hating your brother. In fact, such a person is a liar. It's not a lie to admit he hates his brother. Hatred is always sincere. Criticism is always sincere. Bitterness is always sincere. I am not aware of any warning in the Bible about practicing insincere hatred. But insincere love, now that is another matter; particularly when someone is making a public statement about their love for God. *If anyone says "I love God..."* Remember the audience to which he writes, his church, had been split by people who made very sanctimonious claims to loving God and being Christians, indeed they were members of the church. Yet they felt no remorse for dividing the church and wreaking havoc on relationships and starting their own gig down the road. In context, John describes this as hating your brother.

Where someone claims to be a Christian, but has no time for fellowship with others, criticizing the church and writing it off, practicing a solitary devotion, do we not have to ask whether that person is deluded and whether God really does live in him? Where the life of God is at work, it sweetens bitterness, melts hardness, and multiplies love. (David Jackman, The Message of John's Letters, p. 126)

John gives the illogic of the man's claim to love God, *for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.* (1 John 4:20) It's easy to love God in the theoretical. It's much more difficult to love actual people. To love actual people requires dealing with their annoyingness; bearing with their failures; sympathizing with their circumstances; giving to their needs. As the old saying goes, "To dwell above with the

saints I love, oh that will be glory. To dwell below with the saints I know, now that's another story."

John argues from the lesser to the greater. (Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*, p. 170) If I can't love the visible person in front of me, who I can see, touch, hug, and wash their feet, how can I love a God I cannot see, touch, hug, or wash his feet? It is similar to what Jesus said, *As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.* (Matthew 25:40) Our love to God's children who bear the Father's image shows that we love their heavenly Father as well.

When, How, Where and Why God Loved Us First

1 John 4:19 is our focus today. *We love because he first loved us.* Some of you may be noting that this verse isn't quite the way you remember it. I agree. Some historic translations have translated it, *We love "him" because he first loved us.* While that is no doubt true, the "him" was added in a few ancient manuscripts of this text because the "we love" needed a subject. It's just like if you say to your family member or spouse, "I love you." The "you" is important. If she says, "I love you," and you respond, "I love..." She will say, "Yes, who do you love?"

We love. The Greek doesn't support the "him." It simply says *we love because he first loved us.* It is kind of confusing in isolation, but it makes sense in context. This whole section is about the life and love of God the Father being created and expressed in the life and love of his children. We have love toward God but also toward one another. So most modern translations say it that way. *We love because he first loved us.*

The real meat of the verse is in the second clause as the second clause has a causal relationship with the first. The love we have for God and for others is because God has loved us first. What is that relationship?

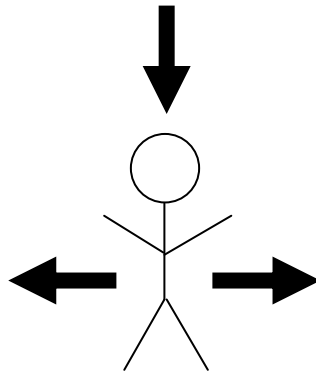
God's love toward us, received and believed personally, creates by the Holy Spirit God's love in us

In other words, the love that indicates we are actually saved is NOT self-originating. It's like the old saying, "Which came first; the chicken or the egg?" That little philosophical puzzle continues to confound because to have an egg you have to have a chicken; to have a chicken, you have to have an egg. The question of which came first is a conundrum.

Not so with saving faith and its byproduct of love. The only way a self-centered sinner lives a life of self-denying life of love is if something supernatural happened. In salvation, God takes the initiative. God is the first cause. God is the originator. God's love through Christ and by the Spirit supernaturally creates a whole new orbit of life, revolving around God and the needs of others. Understanding this is the difference between Christianity and all the other religions of the world.

Let's go back to a previous illustration....

Remember this?



This is a picture of love in salvation. God's love to us means we horizontally love others. If this graphic was to happen in sequence, God loves us first (downward arrow). The downward arrow is first. This creates love to God and love to others. This is how salvation is of God. God takes the initiative. He loves first. He reaches down to us in love. The result is transformation (horizontal arrows).

Religion does it the opposite way. Religion begins by urging us to love others (horizontal arrows first). To do good. To be good people. Fight for social justice. If we do, now God's love is extended to us (downward arrow second). God's love is a response to my love. I earn God's love. If I do enough loving things, God will love me and in the end save me.

In religion, sinners love others so God will love them. In true Christianity, God loves sinners before they love him. One is performance based salvation. The other is grace based salvation. The one magnifies man's goodness and ability. The other magnifies God's mercy and love. One is about man. The other is about God.

Which better reflects this verse? *We love him because he first loved us.* I hope you see it clearly.

When God loved us first, where God loved us, how God loved us, and why God loved us are wonderful and life-giving and precious truths for all who hope in God. Let's answer those.

When did God first love us? *In eternity past he chose to love us*

While there is mystery to us how God is eternal and how his eternal purposes are accomplished, there is no mystery to God in this. He has explained it to us this way: in eternity past, before he created the world and us, he purposed the whole story. Everything. When he purposed and planned the story of everything, he chose to love us even back then. He loved us before we existed. Is that so hard to believe? That God loved us before we existed? Can a woman have love in her heart for a future husband she prays for? This past Valentine's Day, Jennifer gave me a special gift. It was a journal in which she wrote an entry every Valentine's Day starting February 14, 2002. It starts out, *To my dearest husband....* She wrote in the journal for 12 years before God brought us together. Love letters to a future and as yet, unknown, husband.

Can a parent already feel love for a child who hasn't arrived yet? Of course. If we humans can have present love for future people, why can't God? God says, I loved you even back then.

...Even as he chose us in him **before the foundation of the world**, that we should be holy and blameless before him. **In love he predestined us for adoption** as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:4-6, emphasis added)

God chose to love us before the foundation of the world. This is the amazing love of God. Before we even were, he chose to love us and he chose to adopt us.

This serves to highlight that man's salvation does not begin with man, it begins with God. He loved us before we even were. Let's say this wasn't true. That somewhere along the way, during the story of man, God decided, "OK, now I'll love you." We would easily think, "God found us to be love-worthy! The cross is a statement about our worth and value! What amazing people we must be!"

In order to insure that we never think God's love for us is based on our worth, performance, or anything else, God chose to love us and adopt us before time began.

How did God first love us? He loved us in our sin and hatred for him

This may seem confusing at first for a couple reasons. First, it doesn't feel like we are in revolt against God. Society goes on day-to-day, and from our perspective, good people do life in a generally positive direction while bad people do the stealing, cheating, and murdering.

God's perspective is far different. Humanity as a whole is set against God. We are all in moral and spiritual rebellion against him.

As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." (Romans 3:10-12)

How did he love us? He loved us in the midst of and in spite of our spiritual rebellion against him.

...But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

This also answers the "where."

Where did God first love us? The cross is God's "I love you"

While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Jesus' death in our place, bearing our sin, the death we deserved, is God's love statement. John will also write, *Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends* (John 15:13). Jesus was our friend. He is a friend of sinners. He died for us.

God loved us by giving of himself for us. Jesus loved us by giving his life for us. Love starts with God. Our love is a responding love; a grateful love for his first love of us.

"I will crush my Son under the full fury of my righteous wrath for you. In the Garden of Gethsemane, my Son will cry out for this bitter cup to pass from him. And I will remain silent. Why? Because I love you that much. And when my Son utters that shriek on the cross, unlike any other protest in all of history, "My God! My God! Why

have you forsaken me?" I will again remain silent. Why? To convince you that I love you. Behold the supreme demonstration of my love—the cross—the death of my Son. What more can I say? What else do you require to be convinced of my love for you?" (C. J. Mahaney, *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, p. 39.)

Why did God love us first? For the glory of his grace and our confidence in his eternal love

This isn't the question 1 John 4:19 answers, but it is the natural question a sinner asks when he grapples with God's love. Why? Why would you love me? Herein lies the wonder and praise of God's electing and eternal love. That question is the question of genuine faith. As the song says, *Amazing love, how can it be, that thou my God shouldst die for me?*

By loving us as he has, it insures that we can't take any credit for our love for God or others. *We love because he first loved us.* This should produce a tremendous humility among genuine Christians. A humble love that looks toward others and serves them with the kind of love we have received from God.

That is why love and non-love are such good indicators of our spiritual standing before God. It's easy to see where hate comes from, but love—this kind of love—can only come from God and indicates that we are children of God.

He loves you. Christian, he loved you before you were you. He loved you before you believed. He loved you in your sin. If he loved you then, he loves you now and he will always love you.

So it may feel like we discover the gospel or we find God or that our journey leads us to God. In reality, this is a story of God finding us.

Ken Gire tells a great story of a little girl who lived at the edge of a forest and wandered off one day into the woods and thought she would explore all the dark secrets of the forest. The farther she wandered, the denser it became, till she lost her bearings and could not find her way back. As darkness descended, fear gripped her, and all her screams and sobs only wearied her till she fell asleep in the woods. Friends, family, and volunteers combed the area and gave up in the thick of night. Early the next morning, as her father began his search afresh, he suddenly caught a glimpse of his little girl lying on a rock and, calling her by name, ran as fast as he could. She was startled awake and threw her arms out to him. Wrapped in his tight embrace, she repeated over and over, "Daddy, I found you!" (Ken Gire, Source Unknown)

We are the little girl. It feels to us like we are the ones doing the rescuing; we are the seekers; we are the search party out to find God, to find our way home, to save ourselves. But the real wonder of the story is that God found us. Loved us. Forgave us. Saved us. Will love us for all eternity.

We love him because he first loved us.

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