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Week Six

II. The testing of the spirit of love (I John 4:7-21)

For the third time, John treats the subject of Christians loving the brethren. The emphasis is upon love for the brethren as an indication of genuine faith. Those who are God's children will love as God loves and as He commands. Thirty-two times the word "love" occurs in the next eighteen verses. Essential for the assurance of the believer is this spirit of love for the brethren.

A. The source of love (4:7-8)

In John's command to love the brethren, he is asking for spontaneous, self-giving kindnesses which are indifferent to the merit of the object. The stated reasons for having such a spirit toward other Christians is not based on feeling but the mind. The source of love is God and love is a distinctive of God's person. (Do not let the 20th century meaning of "love" rob this word of its correct concept.) In that the one called upon to show love has been begotten by God and assuredly knows God, he also has this distinctive quality. In order to habitually manifest a life of love for others, one must have been birthed into the family of God (v. 7).

However, the one not loving habitually demonstrates that he has never been saved. He lacks the family characteristic that comes with spiritual birth (v. 8). This does not mean that unbelievers know nothing about God or the Bible. However, unbelievers do not have an ability to manifest habitually the same spirit for the brethren. Without a saving knowledge of God, there can be no real love.

B. The example of love (4:9-10)

The kind of love, which John is declaring, is exemplified by God in sending Jesus Christ to this earth. Lest Christians be puzzled by the love God demands, John gives a perfect illustration of God's love for the believer. God sent His only begotten Son. "Only begotten" includes the idea of "unique, only one of a kind, precious and an only child." Thus, one aspect of His love was the sacrificial giving of one who was very special to Himself. By God sending His Son, those who receive Him benefit in that they

acquire the life of God. Consequently, the objects of the love of God receive a great kindness which is totally undeserved. The love of God has as its purpose the sinner acquiring the life of God (v. 9).

It must not be assumed that love was initiated by man. Love was first demonstrated for all by God on Calvary. There, Christ became the wrath-appeasing sacrifice which placated God's anger over the sinfulness of mankind ("propitiation"). All love for others is to be evaluated by God's love given on behalf of an undeserving world (v. 10).

C. The obligation of Love (4:11-16)

Those who have experienced this love in salvation have a moral obligation to love others the same way. To not love this way shows a wrong spirit. God's love should be received as an incentive to proper love (v. 11).

It is true that no one has ever seen God the Father. Yet, God desires that every believer has assurance of being His child. This assurance is possible "if we love one another." A correct expression of God's love by the believer brings assurance because the Christian is in accord with God's Word. Expressing God's love properly shows that God's love has accomplished its intended work. The input of God's love has its Biblical output upon others. The fruit of "loving the brethren" has been achieved because the Christian follows God's example of loving (v. 12).

Love for the brethren alone cannot give assurance of salvation. It is essential that the believer recognize the Holy Spirit, who dwells within him. In receiving the Holy Spirit at conversion, the believer receives a new nature. Therefore, one who loves the brethren will also have the internal witness of the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit enables the change from no love to love (v. 13). Thus, it is the Spirit of God giving assurance to the believer's spirit about his new birth (Rom. 8:16).

Further confirmation of one's salvation comes from living in harmony with the teaching of the apostles. John writes that Christ's mission in this world was to become the Savior. John saw this and gave witness to this truth (v. 14). Anyone who agrees that the Jesus, who died on Calvary, is the Son of God does so because he is saved. Because of salvation, God indwells them (by His Spirit) and the believer dwells in God (by means of his new family relationship). The truth of this divine abiding is assurance of the new life with God (v. 15).

From this abiding relationship with God, the believer comes to know and believe in an experiential way, the greatness of God's love. Although this love is not fully perceived at salvation, it becomes increasingly clearer. To be saved brings the knowledge that God is love. Those who show the love of God to the brethren do so because they are saved. Salvation brings the possibility of manifesting the fruit of love. Showing this fruit brings assurance of salvation (v. 16). Believers should take

this obligation seriously (v. 11) not because it is a debt, nor because it brings assurance of salvation (v. 12), but because it is a normal fruit of the Spirit, who indwells every believer (vv. 13-16).

D. The reality of love (4:17-21)

The love of a Christian for other believers has an upward benefit. Love correctly displayed develops a confidence before God concerning the future judgment. When love is exercised faithfully, the believer realizes he is living just as Christ lived in this world. The evidence of love was seen in each. A continuing display of love brings assurance from God rather than future judicial condemnation for violating God's teaching (v. 17).

Because of love for the brethren, there is nothing to fear concerning one's future destiny. Mature love developed through habitual practice removes fear of judgment. Such fruit gives evidence of Christ-likeness. However, its absence shows an immaturity in love, a lack of assurance and a fear of judgment (v. 18).

Love for other Christians is a principle of God's Word. John writes, "we are loving Him, because He loved us first." He sets forth love as an habitual practice, thus, a mark to distinguish God's people from the world (v. 19).

To claim love for God but to withhold love from a brother is to profess a lie. Love for Father and brothers go together. Love which always finds an object will not find the distant object (God), if it rejects the nearer object (a Christian). Christians habitually love one another (v. 20).

Being a commandment from God, love is an eternal obligation. It is not discriminatory. Since love is not an emotion, it cannot be expressed now and then according to one's feelings. As a duty given by God, His children will obey their Father and thereby gain assurance of their salvation (v. 21).

CONCLUSION:

John writes that the indwelling Spirit of God enables the Christian to have a spirit which is careful not to receive every person who claims to speak for God. He will examine the nature, accuracy, and source of the doctrine. This same Spirit brings to the Christian a love for all Christians. Love is not an emotion but a concern for another's spiritual well-being. This love is commanded by God and its habitual presence in one's life gives assurance of salvation and fearlessness about the judgment day. Both of these practices can easily be tested by the professing Christian.