

God is love

1 John 4:7-21

by Arthur Goodwin

Love is of God

Verses 1 to 6 of First John 4 are a parenthesis and in verse seven John returns to the theme with which chapter 3 ended: "This is His commandment (...) that we should love one another". From verse 7 to verse 21 the apostle's accent is on *love*, both the love of God Himself and that of His children — and twice in this passage we are told that "God is love" (vv. 8 and 16). In First John 1:5 the apostle told us that "God is *light*". This is not an attribute of God such as power, wisdom or righteousness; but what is *intrinsic* to God. Light has reference to His purity, His detection of and refutation of evil. Love again is not an attribute, but the very essence of God's nature revealing itself by its actions. For its display love needs an object and so we read in John 3:16, "God so loved the world", and in verse 10 of our chapter, "God loved us."

So John reverts to his former theme and exhorts in verse 7: "Let us love one another". This is the natural outcome of the fact that we are Christians, for "love is of God". Love originates with Him and it flows forth from Him. As we have already stated, love is His nature — and as Peter tells us "we are partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). So we are 'born of God', we 'know God' and we have the 'nature of God'. That means that all this should be exemplified by our love for one another.

Of course 'love' in this context has to be understood according to the truth of Scripture. Generally the term merely has reference to natural affections, and perhaps more often than not it is connected with the display of our passions. There is probably no word in the English language that has been so debased as the word 'love'. But in Scripture it has a much deeper and profound meaning. For instance, God's love is demonstrated even in His chastening. Hebrews 12:6 states: "Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth". It may be that occasionally our love for a fellow-believer has to be shown by a word of reproof.

The love of God had been manifested to the apostle John in that he was a witness of the Lord's presence here on earth. He opens this very epistle by speaking of the One, "which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life" (1 John 1:1). Such is not our privilege, but the love of God has been manifested to us in the Gospel: "God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him" (v. 9). And then again: "God ... loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (v. 10). *Propitiation* is that aspect of the death of Christ which so vindicated the holiness and righteousness of God that He can be merciful to the whole world. The word may correctly be translated 'mercy seat', that is the place where the blood of the sin offering was sprinkled. When anyone appreciates this and believes it, he acknowledges the truth of Romans 5:8, "God commendeth His love towards us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us". Notice that all is of *God*. "Not that we loved God, but that *He* loved us".

In verse 11 we are commanded that we 'ought' to love one another. It is not a voluntary act, but it is an obligation. I can almost hear someone saying, and indeed I fear that I might so say myself: "Do you know what brother So and So did to me or what sister So and So said about me? And you tell me that I ought to love them!" Well I am only quoting the commands of our Lord Jesus whom

we do love. It is assumed that we love God and according to what John is teaching here so should we love our brethren. In Second Peter 1:7 we read: "Add to knowledge, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love". The Greek word for 'brotherly kindness' is simply love, but of the sort that is shown in the world amongst men. But the word translated 'love' (or 'charity' in the AV) is that used for *divine love* and this is the love that is perfected in us. If God so loved us, even so we ought to love our brethren.

Seeing God through love

In verse 12, John repeats what he had said in the first chapter of his Gospel: "No man hath seen God at any time" (John 1:18). But on that occasion he immediately added as an answer to such a situation: "The only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him". But as John writes his Letter, the Son has returned to glory and is out of our vision. The answer to the dilemma is different: "If *we love* one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is perfected in us". Romans 5 tells us that "the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us" (Rom. 5:5). Love amongst believers is the evidence that God dwells in them, and we can say that God is seen in the saints.

In First John 3:24 we know by the Spirit that *God abides in us*. In 4:13 we know that *we abide in Him*, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. How many believers appreciate that they are indwelt by a divine Person, who will 'teach them all things' (John 14:27), 'guide them into all truth' (John 16:13), 'show them things to come' (John 16:13), 'receive of Christ and show it to you' (John 16:14), and perhaps His most blessed function, 'testify of Me' (John 15:26), that, is, of course, our beloved Lord.

In verses 14-16 we have the essence of the Gospel and here John speaks from experience; every time he uses the pronoun *we* it is *emphatic* — indicating that he is not talking about mere theories but what he knows to be fact: it is his first hand experience. He knows the truth that the Father sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world. He had been the writer who had penned John 3:16 — no doubt the best known and best loved Gospel verse throughout the world.

Notice again the all-embracing appeal of the Gospel. God's love in the Gospel is not addressed only to the Jews or a certain selected company, but to the whole world. So here again in these verses we have that all-embracing word 'whosoever'. Here too we have the confession necessary when a sinner believes the Gospel: "Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God". Again there is a link with the apostle's Gospel, for in John 20:31 we are given the very reason why John wrote it: "These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name". All these wonderful truths about which the apostle has been writing give us a revelation of the love of God, the outward manifestation of Himself. The Christian believes it, revels in it, basks in it and dwells in it, and in so doing dwells in God and knows that God dwells in him. This serves as an emphasis of what had been stated in First John 3:24.

The consummation of love

The opening clause in verse 17 should read: "Herein has love been perfected with us". The preposition 'with' suggests proximity, and 'perfected' suggests that love has reached its climax. Hence we need not fear in the Day of Judgment. This, of course, does not refer to the Great White Throne of judgment that we read of in Revelation 20:11, where the sins of men are dealt with. Our sins have already been dealt with in the death of Christ. Here we have a reference to Second Corinthians 5:10, which speaks of the judgment seat of Christ where our lives, not our sins, will

come under review. What we did not understand down here will then be made clear to us and there, we trust, we shall hear: "Well done thou good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21).

Not only need we not fear but, indeed, we may have *boldness*. Why so? On what authority? The answer is: "Because as He is, so are we in this world" (1 John 4:17). The more I think about this verse, the more I marvel. "As He is". Who? Christ Himself. Consider Him — the Son of God, the perfect Man, His immaculate life, His obedience, His grace, His holiness, all this and much more. Now God judges: "As HE is, so are YE". Fear and love are incompatible as verse 18 points out.

"We love [Him] because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). The 'Him' should not really be there, because the apostle is not expressing a specific truth but enunciating a principle. We certainly do love Him and this idea would be included whether the 'Him' was inserted or not. The thrust of these words is that we in loving are *reflecting* the nature of God Himself. And the test of our love is that if we say we love God whom we have not seen, then we will certainly love our brethren whom we can see.