

Sermon: Love God
Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 4:15-5:6; John 15:9-17
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Every week in our time of confession we mention our failures in loving God and in loving each other. This does not mean that we do not love God and our neighbor - it means that we are not perfect yet and we often stumble. And 'not perfect yet', as we all know too well is an understatement.

Love is the crucial mandate in the Christian faith. This is logical - because God is love.

Being in God is being in love

When we talk about love for God and for each other, we must clarify from the outset that God's love for us is primary. All true love is a response to God's initiative of love. Our love is a copy of his; he originates love, and we follow his example.

God is love; it is his deep character. It is not just part of his actions, but it is his being; his essence. This loving God created us in his image, and part of this image is that we are made to love - to love Him and others.

And if by faith we are related to God, or to use more biblical language, if we are *in God*, then we are *in love*. We cannot speak of God without speaking of love, and if we are with God, we are with love.

If you are in the Nile, you are in water.

If you are in the desert, you are in sand.

If you are in God, you are in love.

Man is created by this loving Being, hence he is *born to love*.

But not only that; we are also *born to be loved*, and if we do not experience being loved, it eats at our heart. Nothing hurts as badly as the feeling to not be loved. We hunger for love.

Without experiencing love ourselves, we are not able to give love to others, I think. That is why knowing God and being in God is so radically important. He is the source of all love for us. And he is the source of the love that we are able to give to others.

If we love perfectly, St John writes, we are people with no fear. This means in the first place, no fear for God. But it also includes no fear of people, no fear of hell. Not even of governments.

Fear has two meanings, it can be alarm, fright, *angst*, on the one hand. But on the other hand, it can also mean reverence and respect.

If you live in fellowship with God, you have nothing to fear from God. You will hear the words of acquittal from the lips of Jesus, who says to the Father in regard to you: "I paid it all. He or she belongs to me. He is mine. She is mine. Even when he is not perfect in love at all."

We cannot say that we love God, and hide from him in fear at the same time. Adam was hiding from God in fear; if we are part of the new Adam, of Jesus Christ, part of his family, we do not hide from him. We trust in his love, and we love.

Perfect love drives out fear. John is not suggesting that any Christian's love could in this life be flawlessly perfect, because only God is perfect. Perfect love means, energized by the love of God, a love that like a small tender plants grows out of the root of God's love.

If we are afraid of God, we have not fully grasped his Gospel yet; the loving God forgives our sins if we confess them; through Jesus he immerses us in love. This love of God tranquilizes the heart; we come to rest with God as a child in the lap of his mother.

2. Love each other by loving God

John writes, not to make us feel bad because we are not perfect yet - but to encourage us. Listen again to 1 John 5:1:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.

When John says 'everyone' he indicates that anyone who sincerely puts his faith in Jesus is born of God, that means, is a child of God.

This means, that if you believe in Jesus Christ, you thereby have irrefutable evidence that you are born into the family of God. No doubts are needed. You are a child of God if you believe.

With the same insistence John says: "and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him."

If you love God, then surely you love others born into the family of God. It is impossible to love God and not love each other. Impossible. If we do not love our fellow Christians, then we must seriously question whether we love God; and whether we truly believe in our Lord Jesus Christ.

John states, in 1 John 5:2:

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.

This seems to be a circular argument: you know that you love God if you love his children. And you know that you love his children, if you love God. The two can never be separated.

How do we know that we truly love other people? We are the best people for others, most loving, if we love God first.

It is so easy to deceive ourselves, but the truth is plain: every claim that we love God is a delusion if it is not accompanied by unselfish and practical love for others.

And how do we know that we have that unselfish and practical love for others? If we really love God. Good humanitarian work is great - but only if motivated by love for God, does it truly serve people without ulterior motives. Though I admit, if I am hungry, I do not care much for the motivation of him who gives me food. Atheist meat is fine with me.

Back to St John, he had in mind here, a natural law of human life. The child naturally loves his parents; and he just as naturally loves his brothers and sisters.

John transfers this to the realm of Christian thought and experience. The Christian undergoes the experience of being reborn; the father is God; and the Christian is bound to love God for all that he has done for his soul. But birth is always into a family; and the Christian is reborn into the family of God; so he loves his siblings.

Love for God shows itself in spending time with him. In prayers. In reading and meditating on his Word. It is something related to your mind, your actions, but also to your heart. Love is more than feelings, but it certainly does include feelings.

Feelings of desiring to be with God; desiring to be with him alone, this is part of love for him.

Love for God also includes the desire to keep his commandments; to do what he tells you to do.

It has this inescapable consequence of obedience. If we truly love God, we love his children - that is actually a major aspect of keeping his commandments. And this love is not vague, soft or fluffy: it is concrete and practical - and it is defined by all of God's commandments.

You cannot say you love someone if you steal from him, for instance. You cannot say you perfectly love God, if you desire his cow or his wife. So listen well, this means that not everything that is called love, is love as defined by the love of God.

Love is about doing God's commandments, his will. And God's commandments enable us love God and others better.

“All you need is love”, sure. But this is only true within the broader view of all of God’s commandments.

St Augustine agreed with that statement of “all you need is love.” He invented it. Audaciously, he said to his church members, “love and do whatever you want”.

3. By our faith and the spirit

John seemed to have a similar view, when he wrote that God’s commandments are not burdensome. Not a heavy load.

This does not mean that obedience to God's commandments is easy to achieve. It is never an easy thing to love people whom we do not like or people who hurt our feelings or injure us. It is never an easy thing to solve the problem of living together; that is a task of immense difficulty.

But the laws of God are not complicated - love, and do what you want...

And also, God has placed within us the power to obey his commands. This is the Holy Spirit - God himself - who is present in our life as a majestic giant energy to support us to love, love, love.

God never lays commandments on us without also giving us the strength to carry it out. He is there by our side to enable us to carry out what he has commanded.

But there is another great truth here as well. For love, no duty is too hard and no task too great. That which we would never do for a stranger we will willingly attempt for a loved one.

I read a story of someone who met a boy going to school long before the days when transport was provided. The boy was carrying on his back a smaller boy who was clearly lame and unable to walk. The stranger said to the lad, "Do you carry him to school every day?" "Yes," said the boy. "That's a heavy burden for you to carry," said the stranger. "He's no' a burden," said the boy. "He's my brother."

Love turned the burden into no burden at all. It is likewise with us and Christ. His commandments are not a burden but a privilege and an opportunity - an opportunity to show our love.

Our love? my love is so small!

These are biblical promises, Biblical ideas, sure. But we must admit - we are so broken and messed up that our attempts to love are often so lacking and pitiful, so selfish, and most of the time we don't even realize it ourselves, just how warped our “love” for others is! And this is also

a very biblical thought, by the way. We should not expect us to be so much better than salvaged fallen man.

Knowing God and His commands does not fix all things so easily, because we ourselves need so much fixing **in the first place...**

Much fixing... but that is happening, as our faith has overcome the world, John says. Just as Jesus himself said, "Take heart, I have overcome the world." Because Jesus is victorious, so are we. By being linked to him, we are set free - free to love and obey. Not perfect, far from it. Messed up. But in that mess, God helps us to love more.

Our faith that Jesus is the Son of God gives us the victory; that means, it enables us to love more and to move forward on the road of obeying God. He gives us the stamina, he gives us hope, he promises to always be with us, he gives us his Spirit to lead us and to strengthen us. He helps us get up when we have fallen.

Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, love for God, love for others, these are the three legs of the stool of our Christian life. If one is missing, we collapse. It is simply impossible to have one, or two, and not the others.

But love for God is the starting point.

Love for God, as a response to God's love for us.

Conclusion

So what to do? Why not at home make a long list of all that God has done for you; and consider the message of the church, how God came to seek you, lost sheep, to take you in his arms.

His love is so immense

And the more we are aware of that, the more we love him in response.
And the more we love all of his children.

But this week, think of some ways to practically and with words, show this love for God and for each other. And maybe you can begin immediately after our worship service, but expressing your appreciation for the others here.

+In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit