

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

### Sermon Series: Walking in the Light with Jesus

(Studies in the Apostle John's first letter)

## **Bringing the Invisible to Light**

(1 John 4:7-19)<sup>1</sup>

Study #6

### Introduction: *Images of God...*

As we make our way through the Bible text we are exploring today, we will come to a provocative phrase.

John writes, **[1 John 4:12] No one has seen God at any time...** to which we say, "Amen." It is true that no one has ever seen God, unfiltered. In fact, in the Ten Commandments, He commanded that we not even try to represent Him, visually.

And yet, throughout history, there have been visual images that have drawn people to consider Him. There are lots of images that prompt people to think, "God".

In Moses' day, the Jews would look at a fiery Mount Sinai, where lighting flashed and thunder rolled, and would see in that display something of God.

In the days of King Solomon, people would go to the temple in Jerusalem, look at the magnificent structure, recognize the shekinah glory dwelling within, and see "God" written all over it.

When Jesus lived in Palestine two thousand years ago, crowds saw lepers cleansed, demons expelled, food multiplied, and the dead raised. In Jesus, they saw God.

We read John's comment about no one seeing God at any time and agree in the absolute sense.

But, if God has never been seen "unfiltered", He has certainly allowed Himself to be seen through filters - a mountain, a temple, human flesh. And we wonder what visual God has given of Himself in 2019? Through what filter might we and others "see" God today?

*Preview...*

As you ponder that question, I'll tell you that this morning we get to the punch line - but not to the conclusion - of our time looking at the first letter written by the Apostle John.

We still have a couple more Sundays to spend in 1 John after today. In those two studies we'll be looking at what John says are vital truths related to our life with God.

However, what we will see in the next few minutes is, in my opinion, the bulls-eye at which John has been aiming from the very beginning.

\*\*\*Today moves from *LOVE* to *ABIDING* to *TESTIMONY* to *ABIDING* to *CONFIDENCE*.

The thirteen verses of our passage move from theme to theme.

John writes about the beauty of a loving church (vv. 7-11) and then of the mystery of "**abiding**" in God (vv. 12-13). He goes on to write about the beauty of a confessing, testifying church (vv. 14-15) and then, again, speaks of "**abiding**" in God (v. 16).

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<sup>1</sup> The literary term describing how John puts together the major section of the letter is *inclusio*. *Inclusio* defines a section of literature by bracketing it, front and back, by a reference to a singular theme, with everything inside the brackets relating to that theme. In 1 John, everything from 2:28--4:19 relates to the theme of a believer in Jesus having boldness / confidence at the future Judgment Seat of Christ.

He wraps up with thoughts about confidence in the day of judgment (vv. 17-18).

So, starting at the end, and eating this morning's dessert first, here's a spoiler alert.

In lots of places in the Bible we are told that after this life is over, all those who believe in Jesus and are already eternally saved will stand before Jesus at what we call "The Judgment Seat of Christ".

There, we will give account of how we spent our earthly years.<sup>2</sup> It is this judgment that John refers in this passage.

***[17] By this, love is perfected with us, so 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.***

It is tempting to view the Judgment Seat of Christ as something benign and trivial.

I mean, we're already saved, so Jesus' judgment is probably like a heavenly Grammy or Golden Globe ceremony. If you get an award, great. If not, no big deal. You're already in heaven.

But the Apostle Paul writes of knowing the "***fear<sup>3</sup> of the Lord***" when he talks about this judgment. He compares the judgment to passing through a purifying fire that will test the quality of our works and that will burn up dishonorable works.<sup>4</sup>

So, true, it is not possible that someone who believes in Jesus will find condemnation from God at this judgment. But the Bible is clear that it is very possible that a believer might "***suffer loss.***"

<sup>2</sup> See Romans 14:10-12; 1 Corinthians 3; 2 Corinthians 5:1-11.

<sup>3</sup> Another, perfectly legitimate translation of this word for "fear" is "terror."

<sup>4</sup> See 2 Corinthians 5; 1 Corinthians 3

We understand correctly that we are in no danger of hell at the Judgment Seat of Christ. But we will be standing for judgment before a righteous Judge. Who wouldn't feel nervous about this coming judgment, given Jesus' holiness?

But here, John writes of the possibility that we could approach this judgment with confidence. That's remarkable. The idea of approaching the judgment with boldness fills us with hope.

The truth is that what John has to say to us today is so important that knowing it and applying it will mean that when you stand before Jesus at the Judgment Seat, you will have great confidence. You'll have nothing to fear.<sup>5</sup>

OK. That was the dessert and I hope that a hope for confidence in the day of judgment has whetted your appetite for the meal John's prepared for us today.

The main course of the meal starts with a call for us, right here, to love each other.

### **The Beauty of a Loving Church (1 John 4:7-11)**

#### **Love is From God...So, LOVE! (v. 7a)**

***[7a] Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God***

These words echo what we hear Jesus saying in John's Gospel. Over and over again, Jesus called His followers to love to a life of love, for all people, for the whole world, but especially for each other.

It's easy to see that John was deeply impacted by the love he received from Jesus. He self-described as "***the disciple whom Jesus loved.***" Jesus' focus on love marked John for life.

After three years of walking with Jesus and over a lifetime of living for Jesus, this former "***son of thunder***" became known as The Apostle of Love.

<sup>5</sup> It is before the Son - Jesus - that we will stand at the judgment. (John 5:22)

As he wrote what we're reading today, John was probably thinking of the people he knew who would receive this letter. John was giving oversight to a few small churches in Asia Minor and he may have had people in those churches in his mind when he called them to love.

They were dear friends. Partners in ministry. Courageous saints. Brothers and sisters in Christ. And..they were gossips. Busybodies. Some were lazy, some were mean-spirited, some were power-hungry trouble-makers.

There are all kinds of people in all churches.

The call to love a sweet-hearted saint who always tells you she prays for you is as easy as falling off a log. Loving a prickly saint is different. It's harder, but John doesn't offer an escape clause.

John's exhortation is inclusive. I am to love you, my brother and my sister, my family, in Jesus. You are to love the members of your family in Jesus without exception.

God being love (as John says in the very next verse!), He is the source of love. We are to draw on His example and on His resources to love each other, even when to do so is like hugging a porcupine.

John says that when we're loving one another with a distinctively Christian love, a couple of things become obvious.

### **Those Who DO and Those Who DON'T Love (vv. 7b-8)**

*Positively, the love who loves shows that he is born of God and knows God.*

***[7b]...and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.***

This isn't saying that people who aren't Christians are, by definition, Christians, if they love others. People who don't know Jesus are certainly capable of being loving.

John's saying that when you love your brother or your sister in Jesus with a Jesus-centered love, love them with the love with which God has loved you, you're showing that you're born of God.

Being "born of God" is a binary thing. You either are a child of God or you aren't. A Jesus-centered love identifies you as God's child.

On the other hand, John mentions "**knowing God**" and THAT is a relative thing. We can view our knowledge of God as on a continuum.

We who are God's children can know God *more or less*. When you love, it marks you as a child of God who also knows God. And, the more you love, the more obvious it is that you know God really well.

On the other hand...

*Negatively, the non-lover is a non-God-knower. (v. 8)*

***[8] The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.***

Notice that John doesn't say that the one who does not love is not born of God. That is something we can't say. You can't look at someone who is not loving his brother or sister in Jesus and deduce that he/she is not born again.

It is all too possible that a Christian might not love someone with whom he'll spend eternity. It happens all the time in churches all around the world, from John's day to our own.<sup>6</sup>

What we can say, though, is that the one who doesn't love is on the negative side of the scale when it comes to knowing God.

God, who IS love,<sup>7</sup> infects those who get to know Him with the life-changing condition of love. The child of God who doesn't love doesn't know God very well at all.

<sup>6</sup> See 1 John 2:11; 3:10b; 3:14-15; 4:20 - for hating a brother. As Zane Hodges, writes, "*Those who teach that a Christian cannot hate another Christian are teaching a myth.*"

John goes on to remind us of God's loving nature. He points to how God poured out that love when He sent Jesus to earth for us.

### **We See God's Love in that He Sent His Son (vv. 9-10)**

*God sent His Son so that we might live through Him (v. 9)*

***[9] By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten<sup>8</sup> Son into the world so that we might live through Him.***

Just think of the depth of love that would be required on the part of a mom or a dad today to give up a child so that someone else would live.

And, actually, it's beyond impressive. It's unfathomable that someone would do that.

But God's love for us - people who are all made in His image - was so unfathomable that He gave what was most precious to Him. He gave His Son so that we might live.

Jesus' death for your abundant life. Jesus' death for your eternal life.

The supreme expression of God's love is the gift of Jesus. And the gift of Jesus was what turned God's wrath away from you and that turned His grace toward you.

*God sent His Son as a propitiation (v. 10)*

***[10] In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.***

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<sup>7</sup> It will not do to reverse and say "love is God" for God is many other things besides love. He is just and holy and omnipotent. But everything about God is consistent with love.

<sup>8</sup> "**Begotten**" refers to the paternal relationship of the Father to the Son; not to any original begetting of the Son by the Father.

The story (the "meta-narrative") that we might like to tell about ourselves is that the great love story between us and God started when we started loving Him.

It's a nice story, but it's a false narrative. It's fake news.

The reality is that God was justly angry and offended by our sin. We and God had each turned our back to the other.

And while we were still sinners in rebellion (see Romans 5:8), God took the initiative and sent Jesus, who died a sacrificial death on a Roman cross to take the penalty for our sin.

By His death, the debt we owed to God was paid. It was paid, as we sang today on that "wonderful" cross. That meant that God could turn to face us in love. His arms are now outstretched to welcome us when we turn to Him.

Love started with Him. Love flowed to us. Now it is to flow from us to each other.

### **God Loved Us...So, LOVE! (v. 11)**

***[11] Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.<sup>9</sup>***

Love is to be the mark of the Christian and love is to be the mark of the church. Today, God is calling us to a life of love.

It's great when we hang with good friends. God smiles when we relax and enjoy great times together with people we enjoy.

But, it's more than great; it's beautiful when we...  
 ...take the first step to reconcile after there's been a relational rift;  
 ...call or visit someone who is suffering;  
 ...provide financial help to someone who is in need;  
 ...forgive someone who has wronged us;

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<sup>9</sup> 4:12-13 is a near duplication of 3:24. There, it was, "**keep His commandments**", here we find, "**love one another.**" Both identify how to "**abide**" in Him.

...move out of our comfort zone to befriend someone who doesn't like us or isn't like us.

John starts (v. 7) and ends (v. 11) this first section by urging us to from-the-heart, concrete-and-practical, counter-cultural acts of sacrificial love. The church where there is love is a beautiful church.

Then, John says something unexpected. He writes about *“seeing God”* and *“abiding in God.”*

He points out, as I did at the beginning today, **[12a] No one has seen God at any time.**

He continues with **[12b] ...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.**

I'll not say much about this now, except to note that when John refers to an *“abiding”* relationship with God, he is saying more than that someone has eternal life.

To *“abide”* is to live the life of an obedient disciple. It is to keep God's commands. It is for us, God's children, to take on the traits of our Heavenly Father.

Every Christian has eternal life. Every Christian does not necessarily *abide*. John says that if you love, you enter into that abiding relationship with God. Expanded, this means that if we love each other, we together enter into that abiding relationship with God.

We'll come back to that idea shortly. First, though, listen as John lists another element of a beautiful church. The beautiful church is a testifying, confessing church.

### **The Beauty of a Testifying, Confessing Church (vv. 12-14)**

#### **Testifying to the Father's Gift of the Son (v. 14)**

**[14] We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.**

It is common for us, today, to refer to Jesus as *“Savior.”* It may surprise you to learn that it wasn't so common for John to write of Jesus as *“Savior.”*

This (1 John 4:14) is the only time in this letter that he uses the word *“Savior.”* And we only find the word *“Savior”* applied to Jesus one time in the Gospel of John.

It occurs after Jesus had a fascinating conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well in the middle of the day. She went from that encounter to the village and told the people there all about Jesus.

They then came out to meet Jesus and believed in Him, just like the woman had. These Samaritans testified, **[John 4:42] “...we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world.”**

Here in 1 John and in John's Gospel, calling Jesus *“Savior”* is to speak of His saving work on behalf of all people everywhere.

This is “Part 1” of the testimony of the church. We testify that Jesus was sent to earth by the Father. We testify that there is no Savior other than Jesus. We testify that He did not come to earth on behalf of some, but on behalf of *“the world.”*

“Part 2” follows. The beautiful church confesses that Jesus is the Son of God.

#### **Confessing Jesus, the Son of God (v. 15)**

**[15] Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.**

You became God's son or God's daughter by adoption when you placed your faith in Jesus. If you have not yet placed your faith in Jesus for eternal life, you will become His child at the moment of faith.

But Jesus has been God's Son forever. He is able to be the Savior of the world because He is God's eternal and *“only begotten”* Son.

In John's Gospel, there is this wonderful conversation between Jesus and Martha, whose brother, Lazarus, had recently died. Martha doesn't know that Jesus will soon bring Lazarus back to life.

Before He performed that miracle, though, Jesus said to Martha, **[John 11:25] "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, [26] and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"**

Martha's response? **[27] "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world."**

Martha confessed that Jesus was "**the Son of God.**" Whenever someone confesses Jesus as "**the Son of God**", they are acknowledging that He is the Christ/Messiah, the only One who can offer eternal life.<sup>10</sup>

Now remember, John is writing all of this (vv. 14, 15) to churches. And churches regularly gather for times of prayer and praise and testimony, for song, and for teaching and preaching.

Someone might confess Jesus in any venue - at home, at work, at play. But the gathered church can confess Jesus as Savior and as the Son of God when it comes together for worship.

And very early in the life of the church, it became common for churches to say out loud what they believed, and to say it, together. They wrote creeds - like the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and others - that reminded them of their faith's foundation.

Among the oldest creeds of the church is the Apostles' Creed. This creed testifies, it confesses, what is true about Jesus.

I think the old Apostle John would love for us to recall who Jesus is by reciting, together, these lines from the Apostles' Creed.

## **The Apostles Creed**

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

God smiles when we testify to the truth of Jesus. John urges us to testify and to confess our belief in Jesus. When we do, we enter into that abiding relationship with God - **[1 John 4:15] God abides in him, and he in God.**

When we do this, together, again, it's beautiful.

Wherever there is a church that is, first, filled with people who love each other as God has loved them AND that is filled with people who confess and testify to who Jesus is, it's not only beautiful. It's powerful.

Let's go back now to that "**not seeing God at any time**" idea.

## **Glimpses of God in a Loving, Confessing Church (vv. 12a, 16)**

**[12a] No one has seen God at any time...[16] 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.**

If you are struck by how "*out of place*" those words about no one ever having seen God seem, you are not alone. Lots of people have been confused by that line.

<sup>10</sup> Note Peter's confession, when Jesus asked who the disciples thought He was, **[Matthew 16:16] "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."**

In the mix of a passage that's all about loving each other and all about testifying and confessing truth about Jesus, why mention that God, in His unfiltered majesty, has never been seen?

Well, here goes.

It is just as true today as it was in John's day that no one has seen God in His absolute holiness.

Even when Jesus, the Son of God, walked the roads of Galilee two thousand years ago, He was deity, but that deity was veiled by a human body. That body of Jesus Christ was the filter through which people viewed God.

Now, His human body doesn't walk the earth. But there are lots of human bodies who do walk the earth who believe in Him. And together, all of us who believe in Jesus make up what the Bible refers to as "***the body of Christ.***" (See 1 Corinthians 11)

So, the ordained filter through which God may be seen today is the church.

No one has ever seen God. But when we love one another and when we testify and confess to the truths that Jesus is Savior and Son of God, people get a glimpse of God.

It's one of the most extreme ideas you'll find in the Bible. The church is now the shape of God's body to a watching world.<sup>11</sup>

And now we have a better idea of the stakes involved in living up to our high calling in Jesus than we ever have.

It's possible for someone to "see" something of God in nature - His power, His creative genius.

But it's only possible to see God's amazing grace and love through the living, breathing body of Christ as we love and as we proclaim Jesus.

The miracles of Jesus were "signs", testifying to who He was. Savior. Son of God.

In the same way, the acts of love that are to mark our lives and our church are "signs" shouting "God" to a world in desperate need of what only Jesus can provide.

### **Final thought: Our Answer to God's Love...LOVE! (v. 19)**

***[19] We love, because He first loved us.***

God poured out His love on us at the cross of Jesus. And He wants us each to relish that love. Revel in the knowledge that Almighty God loves you. Rejoice in it. Rest in it.

But don't think that you are to simply be a reservoir of that love. You were loved to be a river carrying that love to others.

You have been loved perfectly by God so that you will show perfect love to both your family in Jesus and to a world Jesus loves.

***[John 13:34] A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.  
[35] By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.***

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<sup>11</sup> I'm indebted to Philip Yancey for this phrase from one of his earliest books as he wrote to develop exactly this same theme.