

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷ The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

What Does Love Mean?

What does love mean? In catechism class, I teach the kids lots of definitions because words matter. God speaks to us in words. For quite a few years now, I've defined love as "to be devoted to someone, to live for them." That works, but it doesn't always serve as well as I would like. The ancient Greeks used several different words to express the ideas that we roll into "love." One word they used meant loving someone because they're like you. This is the love of friendship, the love of people who enjoy doing the same things and who have the same outlook on life. Another word is the love for people who are different from you. That's the word they use for love between men and women, because men and women are not the same. "Opposites attract" as the old saying goes. The word that the Bible uses most often for love is a word that doesn't imply as much feeling. It's a word that's all about making choices. It's a word that implies actions, even actions that a person doesn't appreciate, because that's what's best for them – the kind of thing we sometimes call "tough love" today. But it's also a word that's all about commitment. I will always be there, no matter what I might be feeling right now. That's the word that we have before us today in our reading from 1 John.

I.

John says, "**Do not love the world or anything in the world.**" I don't think you can read that verse without asking what John means by *love*. Martin Luther taught us to ask, "What does this mean?" Never did he give a simple definition as the answer. His point was always, what does this mean for us and for our lives? When you're seeking the meaning of love, it's natural for us to ask how much love there is. But how do you know? **What does love mean? How do you measure love?**

Is it just a question of saying it? Every year on Valentine's Day, the stores overflow with greeting cards which try to express what we often have trouble saying. Many young couples today want to write their own wedding vows so they can say what they feel. But is it fair to measure love by how often or how well a person states their love? When it comes to our love for God, we declare it when we confess our faith and sing hymns here in church. We confess that love when we're confirmed and when we share our faith with others. But is that full measure of our love? Obviously not. Just as a husband could say he loves his wife and then beat her or cheat on her, so we Christians can say we love God and then live in a way that denies all that matters to him.

So what is the true measure? Is it time? When I was a kid, pop psychologists liked to talk about "quality time." Maybe you couldn't spend as much time as you'd like with your kids, but as long as it was quality time, it would be OK. I think our society has learned the hard way that quantity time is every bit as important. If love is about choices and commitments, how can I not put the one I love first? We all have to set priorities. No matter how busy our lives are, certain things always get done. We get to work. We might like other things more than going to work. We might wish we could go up north for weeks at a time. But most of us make it to work because we need that paycheck to stay alive. We make a commitment and we live up to it. So if loving God is about prioritizing God, how much time do we spend in his house? How much time do we spend studying his word on our own? Is time the measure?

Or is it effort and sacrifice? When my children were small, I used to joke that when they turned 18, I was going to give them a bill for all the money I had spent on them. That would be an enormous amount of money. Over the 21 plus years that I've been a dad, I've earned hundreds of thousands of dollars. But I don't have anywhere close to that amount of money. A huge percentage of what we've spent was for our kids. Because we love them. How much love and effort and sacrifice do we offer God? It continues to distress me how many of our members give little or nothing to church. But there are other ways we sacrifice to God. There are lots of things here at church that need to be done. Sharing the gospel, running our school, building an outreach program that really reaches into our community, caring for each other spiritually and emotionally and even physically— all these things require the people of God to give of themselves, not just their money. But on

an even more basic level, every day we make choices: will I do what God says today or will I sin? Will I be selfish or will I be generous or patient or kind? Will I insist on what I want or will I listen to others?

What is the true measure of love? The truth is, it's all of the above. John says, **"For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world."** Are we more interested in what we have and in what our sinful natures want, or in what God says? We cannot claim to put him first in our lives if the things that are most important to us, the things that we spend the most time on, the things that we're willing to sacrifice for are things that come from this sinful world.

John says, **"The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."** Choosing this world is the surest way to kill our faith. But the person who loves God – who puts God first – will live forever, because that person will constantly feed their faith. That person will flee from temptation and strive to stamp out the lusts that come from our sinful hearts. That person will cling to Christ. Are we that kind of person? Don't we all have to admit that all too often the things of this life come first? Don't we all have to admit that even though we know better, we choose to put our frustration at other people ahead of God's command not to curse or swear? We choose to put our desire for more money ahead of God's command to come and hear his word? We choose to put our selfishness ahead of God's command to love and honor our spouse? That road ends in death. Sin destroys faith.

But Jesus came to pay for all our sin. Jesus came and lived a life of perfect love for God. He sacrificed that perfect life on the cross for you and for me. He paid for every time we put lusts or selfishness or anything else from this world ahead of God. He washed all that sin away. He rose to tell us that. He rose to make our hearts new through the gospel. He rose and gave us faith in him and he works in his word to make us Christians who truly want to live as God calls us to, who truly want to dedicate more time, more effort, more of our lives to living for him. We will live forever because we know our Savior. To go back to our original question, that is the true measure of love: Jesus laid down his life for us. And because we know our Savior, we dedicate our lives to him. We sacrifice our time and treasure. We put him first and do his will knowing that we will live forever.

II.

So one way to define love is what we put into it. But that doesn't tell the whole story. There's at least one more way of looking at what love means: how exclusive is it? **What does love mean? How many things can you love?**

John said, **"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."** Does that mean that God doesn't want us to love anything or anyone but him? Can you love more than one thing? With some kinds of love, you can. I have three children and I love them all. But do I have a favorite? I hope not, but I wonder if they think I have a favorite? I wonder if they would agree about who it is? Even when a kind of love has room for more than one person, it's hard for us sinners to be perfectly even handed about it. But there are kinds of love that are absolutely exclusive. I have one wife. I can only love her. To love another woman would be to deny my love for her. I chose the woman I married and for as long she is alive, for me to choose another would be to repudiate my choice – my love – for her.

That's where we stand with God. He tells us to love our parents and our children and our fellow believers. He tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. But in almost the same breath he tells us to love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind and all our strength. If we choose another, we cannot choose God. So John says that in that case, the love of the Father is not in us.

What does John mean by "the love of the Father"? The expression can mean either the love I have for the Father or the love the Father has for me. Most translations leave it up to us to figure out. I think the obvious sense here is just what we've been saying: if I choose to put the things of this world first, I cannot choose God. But the other meaning is also true. If I choose the world, then I lose the love God has for me. I throw it away, just as I would throw away the love my wife has for me if I chose another woman. To put someone else in God's place is to worship an idol. Every time I sin, I worship a false god. Most of the time, that false god is me. I love what I want. I choose my desires over what God says. That's true when I lose my temper in traffic. It's true when I'm lazy at work. It's true when I care more about money than I care about living for Christ. That idolatry sacrifices God's love. It earns hell and left to itself, it will eat away at our faith until it destroys our faith and we land in hell.

But God does not leave us to our sin. He comes to us over and over again in love and renews our faith. The first step is to point out how we worship ourselves. He does that because he doesn't want us to go merrily down the road that leads to destruction. And it hurts. But God is like a surgeon who has to inflict pain to bring healing. After he hits us with our sin, he comes to us with the good news of Jesus and heals us.

Jesus alone loved God perfectly. Jesus alone never worshipped himself. So Jesus never sinned. He never lusted. He never coveted. He loved his neighbor as much as he loved himself. He was even a master of "tough love" when that's what people needed. He loved the whole world and he sacrificed himself so that we all will live. Because he was God the Son, that payment more than covered all our sin and idolatry. That payment covered all the sins of all the world. It covered you and me, today and tomorrow and forever. Jesus rose to tell us that. Jesus rose to erase all doubt about where we stand with God. We are forgiven and we will live with him for all eternity.

That is what makes our hearts new. That message reaches inside us and changes us. John was not talking to people who didn't know Jesus. He wasn't telling them, "It's all up to you. Choose life or death." He was talking to us, to people who already believe in Jesus. He was telling us not to go back down the path that leads to death. He was warning us just how easy it is for us to get caught up in life here and forget what our real life is. Jesus loves us and he wants us to be with him forever. So while we live in this world, we need to choose God. We need to put him first in our lives and flee from temptation. We need to know where the landmines for our faith are so we can avoid them. Every day, we need to know that all of yesterday's failures and all of yesterday's idolatries and all of yesterday's sinful choices are erased from God's record. We are holy and perfect in his sight. Today he gives us strength to love him with all our being. My friends, my brothers and sisters in faith, redeemed children of God, choose him. Love him. Put him first in your life today. Amen.