

Lesson 27 Lecture – 1 John 4:1-21  
Dan Leppo

In the first verse, John implores us to “test the spirits.” What does he mean by this, and how do we do this? First, we need to acknowledge and accept that there’s a bigger picture than we can see. This life is *not* the only life there is. This is an essential truth that, candidly, isn’t always the easiest thing to accept. Why? Because we can’t see the spirit world. Paul told us the evidence of the reality of God and His presence is visible in His creation. Yet, we still struggle with believing what we can’t see. The bridge between what we can see and what we can’t see is a bridge called faith. Paul told those who believe in Jesus, walk by faith, not by sight. Jesus promises this to those of us who believe today, “Blessed *are* those who have not seen and *yet* have believed.” (John 20:29)

I believe one of the most important blessings of believing in Jesus is His Word. The reason I believe this, is because it is true. Jesus Himself said in John 17:17 that God’s word is true. In a world ravaged and torn down by lies and deceit from Satan, God gives us His Word. It is a solid rock of truth we can stand on when the storms of life eventually come - whether they are initiated or allowed by God. When John told us to test the spirits, the implication within this command was that not all spirits are alike. There are two types of spirits – good and evil. Verses 2 & 3 indicate there is not an in between. John tells us the good spirits will confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God. This is a direct rebuke of the false teaching I mentioned in my last lecture called Gnosticism. This test is the same test we *must* use when we are challenged by misguided and deceived messengers of false teachings. Any challenges to the voracity or infallibility of God’s Word as well as Jesus being the only begotten Son of God is, as John points out in verse 3, the spirit of Antichrist.

In the interest of staying focused on the primary message of this section of reading, I’m not going to spend too much time on the Antichrist. The Antichrist is going to be a human being who will be a member of Satan’s unholy trinity. Along with Satan and the Antichrist, the third unholy trinity member will be something called the Beast. The Antichrist will be revealed, I believe, immediately after the rapture, which will kick off the 7-year tribulation period where God will pour out His wrath on a non-believing world. As for *who* the Antichrist will be, he will be the reflection of the name God gave him. He will be the exact opposite of Jesus. He will be a liar void of love for anything but for himself and his own glory.

I know many Christians spend, in my opinion, needless time trying to figure out who the Antichrist is going to be. Personally, I believe he will be coming on the scene in the very near future – if he hasn’t already. However, our focus should solely be on Jesus. Why? Because we can trust Him to be true. As I’m getting older, I’m fed up with being lied to – it brings no peace. The Prince of Peace brings true peace because He is faithful and true. Please forgive me if I don’t spend any more time on the Antichrist – I know he’s a fascinating topic. But life is precious, so I choose to move into the main theme of this letter and leave the Antichrist in the rear-view mirror.

John tells us we are “of God” several times in the first four verses. “Of” in the English language is a preposition. A preposition is defined as a word governing, and usually preceding, a

noun or pronoun and expressing a relation to another word. The Greek word for “of” is “ex.” This is described as origin – the point where action or motion proceeds. Combining the English and Greek definitions of “of,” we find the “of God” phrase as those who believe have a new origin and relation to God. I see this phrase as a confession of the truth of our being born again. Our new birth is a spiritual birth into the family and Kingdom of God. John tells us we have overcome “them” in verse 4. The “them” he is speaking to are the false prophets – led by evil spirits. We overcome them because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. This second half of verse four should be repeated by every Christian every day, if not multiple times every day. The He, who is in us, is the Holy Spirit. The he, who is in the world, is Satan.

A stumbling block for both the believer and non-believer is God created Satan – see the first verse of Genesis chapter 3. The natural and completely understandable objection to this truth is *why* would God create such an awful and evil being. Satan’s original created state was that of the highest order of angels – he was up there with Michael and Gabriel. Just as *we* are, angels are created with free will. Satan chose to *not follow* God. Rather he wants to *be like* God. For those of you who believe God is omniscient – meaning He knows all things – you are probably modifying your question to something like, “*If God knows all things, even though Satan was good in his original design, why would He create him knowing the destruction he would inflict on God’s creation?*” I’m going to provide two answers to this question. The first one you won’t like – and that answer is, “I don’t know.” This is one of the countless mysteries that we finite human beings will not understand of an infinite being.

My second answer to the question of why would God create something that would cause both Him and others pain and suffering, you are initially going to like even less. The first half of my second answer is in the form of a question, “Perhaps we should ask that of ourselves sometimes.” Our original design was good, but our sins have created pain and suffering to God along with those who He has brought into our lives. Now before you start throwing things at me or want to get up and leave, I’m not trying to dump a big load of guilt, shame, and condemnation on each of you. I’m just being honest, starting with myself, regarding all of the unholy thoughts and actions I have had, and continue to have. In the presence of a bright, pure, and holy light of God, I find myself completely undone. Whatever pride, self-confidence, sense of goodness I may have evaporates in a millisecond if I attempt to present myself before my Creator.

The second half of my answer to why would God create something that would cause both Him and others pain and suffering, I believe you will like. I can confidently tell you why He created each of you - because He loves each of you. Even at the worst moment of your life – when you were doing something that clearly was sin, God thought of you lovingly, forgivingly, and redemptively and said, “*I’m going to send my Son to the cross, so I can be reconciled to him or her because I’m passionately in love with my creation. The price is enormous, but he or she is worth it.*” I’m going to get more into why God is like this in a few minutes, but what I’ve just said is the truth. It’s in the Bible.

The “they” in verse five is the nonbelieving world. People who do not know God understand negativity, cynicism, doubt, fear, betrayal, evil, and a distorted version of love. The Christian that is truly walking in the Spirit is exhibiting the fruits of the Spirit which are love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Sadly,

this is a foreign language and behavior to the non-believer. They claim to have never seen evidence of or know God. In Romans 1:20, we read, *“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.”* Therefore, the claim to have not seen evidence of God is really coming from a place of *willful ignorance*. But, before we judge these people, we must understand that willful ignorance is really a mask of deep-rooted pain from an event, or events that led to a hardened heart.

It is not for us to attempt to distinguish whether a non-believer’s hardened heart comes from sins committed against them or sins they committed. The heart of God looks upon these people in the same way as He looked at each of us before we believed – as targets of redemption. We need to remember Peter’s words that the Lord is longsuffering toward us, not willing that *any* should perish but that *all* should come to repentance. Our job is to love them without judgment. The hope is such love lived out through the fruits of the Spirit lights up the darkness in the souls of those who are weary of a life under Satan’s rule.

Beginning in verses 7 & 8, we arrive at the principal theme of this amazing chapter – God is love. All of us love in one way or the other. We have love for people, love for things, love for a way of life, love for nature, etc. The kind of love John is talking about in verse 8 is a love that is unique, or exclusive to God. In the Greek, the word translated to God’s love is *agape*. *Agape* love is described in 1 Corinthians 13 verses 4-8a, *“Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.”*

One caution, though, regarding this magnificent list of descriptives for *agape* love. The truth is *none* of us are living like this *all* the time. Our selfish-driven sin nature rails against an *agape*/sacrificial mindset and heart set. What I don’t want to suggest to you is if you’re not living like this as much as possible, that makes you a bad Christian. Please don’t turn 1 Corinthians 13 into a checklist. If we do this, it can take on the form of a law like the Ten Commandments. Satan will do his best to translate these beautiful words into a kind of law that, ultimately, can’t be perfectly kept. And when we do fail to adhere to loving as God does, then the enemy is quick to slam down the gavel of judgment and condemnation. So, what can we do when Satan is screaming in our ears that we’ve once again failed in loving like God does? We need to season everything in Scripture with grace. By His grace, He loves us. We are saved by His grace. Jesus became the fulfillment of the Law by His grace. He is also the fulfillment of the 1 Corinthians 13 list.

We incorporate the grace God gave and gives us to bridge those moments or times of failures in obedient loving living. For example, say we’re in a stressful or painful situation, and what Jesus would do would be peaceful and seek a solution that is truthful but with a redemptive mindset. However, our flesh takes over, we get upset and do or say something that is counter to what Jesus would do. When this happens, we can listen to one of two voices. The first voice is coming from Satan, and he will say something like, *“See, you’re not a Christian. This is not what Jesus would do.”* The second voice – that of Jesus – would say, *“Ok, you know that’s not what I would have said or done, but remember I love you and have forgiven you for this. Remember my*

*teaching, ask for forgiveness, remember My Spirit is with you, and let's do this again."* Grace is that bridge that allows us to go from glory to glory.

Verse 10 is telling us that the love relationship we have with God was initiated by Him. Romans 3:11b tells us, *"There is none who seeks after God."* We're born with dead spirits and a flesh that wants nothing to do with God. Thankfully, His desire is to redeem and reconcile *each and every one of us* to Himself. Therefore, He took the first step – the supreme gesture – to show us not only is He interested in us, but also that He loves us. This is one of the principal purposes of Christ crucified. Two lectures ago, I talked about the word propitiation. It means to appease or satisfy the righteous wrath of God on *our* unrighteousness as non-believing sinners. God is holy. For Him to maintain His holiness, He *must* and *will* judge unrighteousness. Out of His love for every one of His creations – no exceptions, He demonstrated that love by making a way for each of us to be forgiven of a lifetime of sins and be reconciled into a peaceful and intimate relationship with Him. He took the first step – and it was a big and bold one. We just celebrated this step a couple of weeks ago on Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. Now it is up to each human creation to choose to believe and receive that gesture and show their love and appreciation by taking a step towards Him in belief.

The love of God should be contagious. Why isn't it? This may sting a bit, but it's because we don't 100% believe in God's love. We may think we do, but if we truly did, then we would submit to the Holy Spirit all the time and love like what we read in 1 Corinthians 13 – we would love all the time with an agape love. When Jesus chose to accept the Father's assignment to give up His glory, reduce Himself to a helpless baby born in poverty, live among His fallen creation, be falsely accused by the very people He came to save, and willingly subject Himself to a torturous execution, He did this for one reason and one reason only. Agape love. He completely surrendered His Divine rights to the Father's plan because He 100% trusted His Father's love. When He fell to the ground and started sweating blood in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before His crucifixion, I'm completely convinced as to what caused such stress in Him. Having to be our sin on the cross, He knew the Father would have to take His eyes off of Him. The idea that He would not be in full, constant, and intimate relationship with His Father for the first time in eternity was too much to bear. I haven't sweat a drop of blood over the idea of being separated from God. Have you? Imagine the power of the intimacy with God to get to this point. However, we cannot get to this point on our own – it is impossible. But with God, all things are possible. This is one of the principal reasons He gave us the Holy Spirit when we confessed our faith in Jesus.

The sanctification process for every believer is a life-long journey of allowing the Holy Spirit to replace all the lies and errors that come with flawed human love with the truth of God's love. As we gradually come to fully trust in these truths and surrender the lies, we become freer to love like God does. We cannot do this, though, if we're not willing to trust God's love. This is why Christ crucified should be the centerpiece of our faith. I see the broadest and deepest display of God's love and character at the cross. I've arrived at this centerpiece because the Spirit lives in me. I could not arrive at this foundational truth on my own. If the Spirit lives in me, then I can live in the Spirit. Galatians 5:25 tells us, "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit." Personally, I interpret walking in the spirit means loving like what is described in 1 Corinthians 13. This is what John is referring to in the 11<sup>th</sup> verse when telling us to love one another.

Verse 12 tells us no one has seen God at any time; however, the verse goes on to say we can see the *proof* of God's existence and presence in how we love each other. Yet, how do most of us measure where we are in our walks with God? We think of things like keeping the commandments, the number of times we pray, how often we read the Bible, how many times we go to church, and many other ways. Verse 12, though, tells us the true measuring stick for where we are in our faith – it is by how we love each other. Please forgive the repeated references to 1 Corinthians 13, but I was drawn to this chapter as I kept reading our text. In the opening verses of chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul listed off multiple certain spiritual achievements, sacrifices, and gifts he has, could have, or do. For many of us, if we came across a believer with even 1 or 2 such gifts and talents, we would likely be in awe of him/her. Yet, Paul reduces the value of every single one of them if he did not have love. He concluded that *without love* – meaning not loving others:

- He would have become like a sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.
- He would be nothing.
- None of his spiritual gifts profit him anything.

I am not saying that either the things we do in our walks with Christ, or the achievements/gifts/acts Paul talked about are bad. They are all good. My point is our most accurate and relatable representation of Jesus – when we are truly walking as He walked, is when the people He brings into our lives feel loved – sacrificially, truthfully, genuinely, mercifully, and gracefully. When we hear about witnessing to people, we get freaked out if we don't say the right things - we'll mess up the opportunity to bring a person to Christ. I believe just being kind, thoughtful, and loving to someone or forgiving an offense can often be more powerful than quoting a verse in a witnessing situation. As the old saying goes, for every 100 people, one will read the Bible, and the 99 will read the Christian.

The word “abide” is used three times in verses 13-16. The Greek word for abide is “meno,” which means to stay in a given place, state, relation, or expectancy; abide, continue, dwell, endure, be present, remain, stand. As I read through this definition, three words stick out to me: endure, relation, and expectancy. When abiding in love we are: enduring – not wandering off when times get tough; staying in relation – taking the time to get to know each other; and, living in expectancy of seeing displays and the fruits of that love.

Verse 17 speaks of our having boldness in the day of judgment. Jesus was bold because He knew the truth, but He applied it lovingly. What is the fruit of perfect love? Boldness in the face of painful circumstances and/or persecution. We can not only love, but also *boldly* love because our citizenship is not here but in heaven. What that means is we can be completely free to love – to boldly proclaim the love of Christ regardless of the type of reception. Some will receive it. Some will ignore it. Some will rail against it. The point is we shouldn't worry about the results because we trust we are supremely loved regardless. This is what Jesus did during His ministry – especially the last week of His life. He could do this because He was completely certain of the Father's love for Him and plan for His eternal life.

As I mentioned earlier, when it comes to faith, there are times it can be challenging to not only believe but also have a love for someone you cannot see or touch. Try to step back from your faith for a moment and put yourself in the eyes of a nonbeliever. They see you praying – to them, it's like talking to an imaginary friend. Many of us may have even had an imaginary friend when we were kids. We could put aside our insecurities and fears and say what we want without concern for judgment, ridicule, or humiliation for being our true selves. The problem was, there was nothing coming back – at some point our imaginary friend went away.

Jesus calls those who believe in Him His friends. We can study His Word over and over, but we still can't see Him or touch Him. So, what is it about Jesus – the One we can't see or touch – that makes us love Him? Verse 19 provides the answer – He *first* loved us. This person we've never met or touched; this person who is our Creator who has seen us at our very worst; this person whom we've ignored and wandered away from - chose to take the first step of establishing a loving, forgiving, non-judgmental relationship with us.

We read about the length He went to prove this love He has for us at the cross, and this resonates with us somewhere deep inside. His love touches our soul like no other can because this is how He designed us. We can be with Jesus what we were with our imaginary friend – free to put aside our insecurities and fears and say what we want without concern for judgment, ridicule, or humiliation for being our true selves. What we discover in our faith is Jesus is no imaginary friend. He is alive and very real. Moreover, He not only loves us in a manner that we can be real our true selves with Him, but also He heals us from our burdens to free us to love Him and love the very people who gave us those burdens.

If we're living by faith, then we should be loving because we have faith in a loving God who is love. Hating, bitterness, unforgiveness are all evidence that we are not living in the Spirit. What drives or fuels hate? I would argue it is sin. If someone has sinned against us causing great pain and suffering, our flesh is offended and finds it impossible to love but to do the opposite of love – hate. If *we* sin, then out of shame or embarrassment, we can develop a hate for ourselves. How do we overcome our hate for others or ourselves? We look to the cross and listen to Jesus' first words, "*Father, forgive them, for they know no what they're doing.*" Forgiveness is the antidote to hate. However, the last thing our flesh wants to do is forgive – there's an unfairness in forgiveness. The flesh is looking for some false sense of justice, but forgiveness denies self-defined justice.

God is just, and He is fair. If He can find it in Himself to love and forgive, then He looks to those who believe in Him to do the same. The good news is He knows we are weak, and our flesh is powerful. This is one of the reasons He gives Himself in the form of the Holy Spirit to dwell inside each believer. If we are willing to trust the One who saved us by His grace – and thereby surrender our will to His, we can tap into His greater power to overwhelm what's driving our hateful feelings and do the opposite – love the unlovable and undeserving. Hate is a fruit of an evil spirit. Love is the fruit of God's Spirit. If people see us hating another – especially another brother or sister in Christ, we are not in the right place with God. This doesn't mean He doesn't love us anymore – what this means is our hate is getting in the way of the optimal conditions of our relationship with Him. We are to be witnesses of God's love, so if we're hating, we become false witnesses.

The last verse in our reading tells us he who loves God *must* love his brother also. It's not a suggestion that we love – it is a commandment. Given we have free will, which was given to us to maximize the value of a loving relationship, doesn't it seem odd that we are commanded, meaning we have no choice, to love? The hardened heart doesn't find love in commandments, but God does. We've learned today that God is love, so everything He does comes from a place of love. Take a look at the below diagram that shows what is common with the Ten Commandments and Jesus' two commandments.

The Ten Commandments Compared to the Two Commandments						
#	Commandment	Exodus 20		#	Commandment	Matthew 22
1	Thou shalt have no other gods before me	Verse 3	Love For God	1	You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.	Verse 37
2	Thou shalt not worship graven images	Verse 4				
3	Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain	Verse 7				
4	Remember the Sabbath Day	Verse 8				
5	Honor thy parents	Verse 12	Love For Others	2	You shall love your neighbor as yourself.	Verse 38
6	Thou shalt not kill	Verse 13				
7	Thou shalt not commit adultery	Verse 14				
8	Thou shalt not steal	Verse 15				
9	Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor	Verse 16				
10	Thou shalt not envy	Verse 17				

The first 4 of the Ten Commandments and the first of the two commandments speak to the love for God. The last 6 of the Ten Commandments and the second of the two commandments speak to the love for others. What's the common theme of these commandments? Love. Go figure.

I want to conclude with a brief personal story that I hope will help encapsulate the message that God is love. Many years ago, Vickie and I had a great dog – a Scottish Terrier named Marley. We got him as a puppy, and he had the sweetest and kindest personality you could hope for in a dog. He didn't have a mean bone in his body. Somewhere between him being 6-12 months old, I put him outside in our backyard for him to go to the bathroom. I heard some rustling of leaves, and he ran to the sliding door that I let him out. I could see something was wrong – his ears were pinned back – not what a Scotty's ears should be like. I bent down to check on him, and he snarled at me – something he had never done before. I picked him up, and he was not breathing right. It was a Saturday evening, so we rushed him to the animal hospital. It turns out he had been bitten by a rattlesnake. Praise God, the hospital had an anti-venom serum in stock. Marley survived and went on to live a great life.

The reason I'm sharing this is *prior* to being bitten, Marley was as God designed him – a very sweet, gentle, and fun dog. It wasn't until he was wounded that who he was in his original design was damaged. It was clear the pain from that wound was getting in the way of him being his gentle, sweet, and loving way. I see this as a picture of each of us. A wound caused Marley to move away from his original design. For each of us, the same can be said for our emotional, physical, and spiritual wounds that move us further away from our original design. We are all walking wounded from both the sins that were committed against us and the sins we committed.

One more comment on Marley's story. When he got bitten by that snake – when he was wounded, what was the first thing he did? What was his instinct? He immediately ran to the people he knew loved and cared for him. Yes, he snarled out of his pain, but something inside of him drove him to seek help from the ones who loved him. My question to each of us is why don't we do this? Whether our wounds are new or old, we have a God, who is love and loves us more than anyone else, whose title is also Lord, which means He's responsible for our well-being. Why don't we run to Him to help us with our wounds? I'll leave it to each of you to meditate on your answer and let God reveal why.

One last reference to the 1 Corinthians 13 list of descriptives of agape love. Do you want to be loved like that? The reality is you are – you just don't 100% believe it. The beginning of the path of agape love is the cross where God took the first step to prove His love for you. If the beginning of the path to agape love starts with love and forgiveness at the cross, then it only makes sense that the rest of the path must be paved with love and forgiveness. This is what Jesus meant when He told us we need to pick up our cross daily and follow Him. This is my prayer for each of you. Let's pray.