

*Text of a message delivered by Aidan Wivell for Windsor Park Baptist Church on Sunday 1st June 2025.
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This is Love

1 John 4:7-21

“Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport.” That is the opening line to very popular movie. Do you remember which one? *Love Actually*, the classic Christmas rom-com. The opening monologue, narrated by Hugh Grant, concludes “if you look for it, I’ve got a sneaky feeling you’ll find that, love actually, is, all around.”

And he’s not wrong. Love is everywhere in the world of art. It is the ‘meta-theme’ in the world of human expression. It connects across ages, languages, religions, social classes, and cultures. Bob Marley and the Wailers asked the question we’ve all asked in their 70s reggae track “Is this love? That I’m feeling”? While love-struck hearts, pull petals off daisies in search of a sign... “she loves me, she loves me not, she loves me, she loves me not...”

We long to be loved and to become people of love. And we often wonder what love actually is? A warm fuzzy feeling? Chemistry? An evolutionary response? Or is it more deliberate, a choice? A commitment? To define love many people outside of the Christian faith, turn to the bible for answers, particularly at weddings. **“Love is patient, love is kind ... love never fails”** Paul’s words about love in First Corinthians are timeless and magnetic. We are drawn to the purity of the love he describes, regardless of our world view.

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Today we turn to a similar passage. They come from the book of 1 John. Written by the same John who wrote the fourth gospel, and described himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved. This was a man who knew a thing or two about the love of God, and this is what he wrote:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us.

This is how we know that we live in Him and He in us: He has given us of His Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

We love because He first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And He has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister. (1 John 4:7-21)

For the rest of our time together we'll draw out three themes from this passage that are at the very heart of the Christian gospel. Of what we call the good news. Of what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be human.

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So whatever your faith background, however your love life is going, you are welcome on this journey, I hope these words, and the truth to which they point, could become for you, what the Heathrow arrivals gate was for Hugh Grant. So that whenever you get gloomy with the state of the world, you might discover, and rediscover, that in God, love actually is all around.

God *is* Love

The first of my three simple points today is: God is love. Three of the most famous words in the Bible. Words probably all of us have heard before but until now I couldn't have told you where they came from - without the help of google.

And it's a big call right? It's one thing to say God is *loving* but quite another to say God *is* love. Usain Bolt was extremely fast. He is still on record as the fastest man ever over 100m. But we couldn't say "Usain bolt *is* speed". The Dalai Lama is a spiritual leader admired for his insights. People from all over the world would describe him as wise. But they wouldn't say "The Dalai Lama *is* wisdom".

To say God *is* love is to say that God defines love. Love is not just one of God's character traits. It is the very foundation of His character. And in fact this only makes sense when we remember God as Trinity. C.S. Lewis puts it this way: "*Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love.*" God is fundamentally love because from the beginning the Father, Son, and Spirit have been, and are, loving each other without fear or reserve.

God *is* love also brings perspective to one of the biggest questions people have about God. How can a loving God get angry? How do we balance God's anger with His love? The Bible is quite happy to sit in this tension, stating emphatically that "God is love", but also not shying away from God's anger and judgement. One distinction we can make from our passage is that if God is love, then love is His primary or foundational nature. Everything else God is and does comes from the foundation of love. God does not step outside of love when He brings judgement, or gets angry. Any parent who

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wholehearted loves their child, will still get temporarily angry with them when they live in a way that hurts themselves or others.

Anger is not a permanent part of God's nature. God is not inherently angry. Anger is his necessary response to evil. For this reason many have defined anger as a *secondary characteristic* of God. It is brought about in response to evil and it is consistent with a loving God to bring about justice.

To summarise:

God is love. God gets angry

God is not anger. God is love.

But how does He show it? This takes us right to the heart of the passage, and the whole Christian message: *This is love.*

This is Love

Our passage today is fifteen verses. Did anyone count how many times the word love was used? Twenty-seven! That's almost twice for every verse. This passage is saturated with love. And there were different Greek words for love when this was written. Each of the twenty-seven times here it the word used is *agape*. *Agape* is self-giving, sacrificial, and unconditional love. God is *agape*. And John provides two emphatic statements about God's *agape* that we celebrate as the high points of the church calendar every year.

First in verse 9: ***This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him.*** This is Christmas love. God-with-us, Emmanuel, love. God not requiring us to ascend to Him, but, in Jesus, coming down to us. The same John who wrote these words also said famously ***"the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us". (John 1:14)***

Then in verse 10 we see the love we celebrate at Easter: ***This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*** Jesus who came and dwelt among us, died to make atonement for our sins. See while God is love. I am not. God's primary nature is

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love. Mine is not. There are moments when I demonstrate love. But honestly those moments of pure selfless sacrificial love are interruptions to a baseline level of anxious self-concern.

That's why the words of verse 10 are such good news. ***This is love: not that we loved God but that He loved us.*** Love doesn't start with me. I need the atoning sacrifice He made for me every day as I seek by his Spirit to become a person of love. We said earlier that God's anger is a *secondary characteristic*, a response to evil. I wonder if *our love* is like that. It doesn't come completely naturally to us, it isn't the default condition of my heart, but instead is a response to the love of God. As it says in verse 19: ***We love because He first loved us.***

And when it comes to love, order is important. The one who declares their love first makes themselves vulnerable. They show their hand, put their feelings on the table, risk rejection, and wait for the response. Will their feelings be reciprocated? Or will they be met by awkward silence, or left on read?

When it comes to the love of God we don't have to worry about making the first move. He's gone there. And not just with words but through sacrificial action. We don't need to fear rejection, or abandonment – in fact it is God who has risked those things. Our part is to abide in God's love, receiving it, returning it to God and reflecting it to others.

Communion

One way Jesus gave us to remember and abide in His love is *communion*. In a moment we're going to take communion together before concluding the message. Communion is where we take bread and juice which represent the body and blood of Jesus that atoned for our sin. Taking communion we remember: ***This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.***

So as you look at, touch, and taste the bread and juice, remember: *this* is love. Love come down. Love that went first. Agape sacrificial love. Love that went to the cross for you and me. The clearest

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demonstration of who God is. And the love that we are invited to both abide in and reflect to the world around us.

So I invite you to take communion now before we conclude our time together.

Love Made Complete

Let's now complete our time together by focusing on that word: *complete*. Twice John uses an interesting phrase about God's love being *made complete in us*. In fact it's the same Greek word that is translated "perfect" twice in verse 18. What does it mean for God's love to be made complete or to be perfected? It seems that we have a role to play in the ongoing flow of God's love on earth.

Verse 12 is perhaps the clearest: *No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us*. If you're familiar with John's gospel you may have just recognised another phrase he's used before. It's hugely significant, and quite extraordinary. In John's famous poetic introduction to his gospel he says: *No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made Him known. (John 1:18)*

Did you notice the parallel? *"No one has ever seen God"*. In John's gospel it is *Jesus* that makes the God known. That part makes sense. But now in First John he's doing something outrageous, he's replaced the Jesus part with the role of the *Church*. With *us*! John is saying: *'Make God known. If you say you love God then prove it by loving others! Make the invisible God, visible, by the way you love.'* That is a high calling!

Thankfully we don't do it in our own strength. The degree to which we receive and abide in God's love will determine whether God's love is demonstrated through our lives. The degree to which we allow the Spirit to form us into people of love, to perfect us in love, will determine how much love flows through us.

So I leave you with this metaphor:

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Imagine God's love as a river and our fears as dams. Dams stop or restrict the flow of water. In this case, they block the flow of love. Dams stop or restrict the flow of water. In this case they stop or restrict the flow of love. Is His river of love flowing freely to and through you? Or have you, in fear, built up dams to control the flow of the river?

Maybe you have built a dam to prevent God's love reaching you because you fear what would happen if you let Him in? Maybe you have been rejected or abandoned in the past. Maybe you still feel like a kid picking off daisies: "He loves me, He loves me not..." The love of God does not come down to chance. God is love. He's demonstrated it and He will never change his mind about you. What would it look like to open the dam and allow His love to reach you today?

Or maybe you've built a dam by closing your eyes to the other and attempting to restrict God's love for yourself and those like you? Who is it that you find it hard to love? What are you afraid of?

For all of us, wherever fear is holding us back from love, let's close with this verse:

***There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.
The one who fears is not made perfect in love (1 John 4:18)***

Father, you are love, **we praise you.**

Jesus, you show us what love looks like, **we thank you.**

Spirit, you are perfecting us in love, **we consent to your work.**

Amen.

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These questions are intended to help you think more about this message. We hope they might enable conversation, encouraging you to wrestle with how God might be challenging us to apply what we have heard/read.

Reflecting on Sunday 25th May 2025: Last week Pastor Grant spoke about the risking generosity and how God's call to give is rarely convenient. A week on, how have you been challenged by the call to risky generosity? Have you had opportunity this week to be inconvenienced by generosity?

Questions from this week's teaching:

- 1. God is love.** What does it mean to you personally that love is the very nature of God rather than just one of His characteristics? How do you reconcile the idea of a loving God with the fact that God can be angry or bring judgment?
- 2. This is love.** John wrote: "We love because He first loved us." How does God's initiating love affect your understanding of your own ability to love?
- 3. Love made complete.** Have you ever felt hesitant or afraid to accept God's love? What do you think caused that, and how might you begin to receive His love more fully? Conversely, are there people or groups you struggle to love? What fears or prejudices might be acting like dams, restricting the flow of God's love through you?

If you'd like to chat with someone about your spiritual journey or anything else going on in your life, please contact us at care@windsorpark.org.nz; **we're better together** and **no perfect people are allowed**.

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Below are some further resources that may take the message further and deeper and enable you to explore other viewpoints on the same theme. We also encourage you to engage with the preacher if there are further questions you have or if you'd like clarification on anything. Email info@windsorpark.org.nz and we'll direct your query to the appropriate person.

1. Book: *God Has a Name*

"What we believe about God will shape the person we become." This book invites readers into a deeper understanding of God's personal and relational nature through the powerful name revealed in Scripture.

<https://johnmarkcomer.com/god-has-a-name#buy-now>

2. Bible Project Video: *God's Character*

This is the first video in a helpful series exploring God's character as revealed through scripture.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxwzq1PJlmM>

3. Article: *The Early Church's Strategy of Radical Love*

The early church was used by God to transform the world, and they did it extraordinarily quickly. How did this happen? This article looks at four means of radical love they used to transform the known world.

<https://www.bcne.net/articles/the-early-churchs-strategy-of-radical-love>