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DEVELOPING FOLLOWERS OF JESUS AMONG THE MEN
OF NAGS HEAD CHURCH IN NAGS HEAD, NC

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DEVELOPING FOLLOWERS OF JESUS AMONG THE MEN
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I dedicate this project to my brothers: Geoffrey, Christopher, Jonathan, and Zachary.

May you all continue to love well, as you have loved me well.

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PREFACE

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Finally, I am thankful to the Holy Spirit, He has guided the entirety of my life in Jesus from youth to this day in so many gentle and restorative ways. I am thankful to Jesus for saving me, and granting me purpose and meaning in His calling. I am thankful to the Father for delighting in me and calling me His own. He is the Author of every good

thing, and my life bears His fingerprints. I am His and He is mine.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Male investment in church, as a subset of millennial investment, is declining.¹ The accepted gender gap statistic among churches in America is 60/40 women to men. Yet, men have been of great use to Jesus used to change the world, not just in the first century. From the Apostle Paul to St. Patrick to Martin Luther to Hudson Taylor, and Dawson Trotter, men have been essential tools in God's hands to champion His mission on earth. Certainly godly women have been and continue to be effective tools for the church, but eliminating men from the list of Christian notables of the last thousand years essentially eliminates the church. Any substantive effort to revitalize a church in the United States today must include a heavy emphasis on men.

Context

Nags Head Baptist Church was founded in 1947 as a mission by Frank Dimwiddie, pastor of the Roanoke Island Southern Baptist Church.² His mother, Maud Dimwiddie, asked him about starting a Baptist church on the North Beach. The church began as a Sunday school on Sunday afternoons, as he was still preaching on Roanoke

¹ "Americans Divided on the Importance of Church," Barna Group Inc., March 24, 2014, <https://www.barna.com/research/americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church/#.V-hxhLVy6FD>.

² The subsequent facts regarding Nags Head Church are a result of weekly interviews with Rick Lawrenson on the history and current status of Nags Head Church. These interviews took place on Wednesday afternoons over a period of six months.

Island in the morning. They began meeting at St. Andrews Episcopal Church in the warmer months.

Eventually the church raised enough money to buy two lots, for \$100 each. In January of 1950, the church had their first service in their own building. The building was designed by the pastor and built by the congregation with the help of the community. The first baptism took place in 1953, in the Albemarle Sound, just off the causeway between North Beach and Roanoke. They were still operating as a mission of Roanoke Baptist Church. In October 1956, the Sunday school was officially chartered as a church, and the church was growing with Dimwiddie their pastor.

Dimwiddie did everything when the church started. He taught Sunday school, preached, played the organ and did chalk drawings as a visual aid for the congregation. In 1962 Dimwiddie's father-in-law continued to attend church with his mistress, despite protest from Dimwiddie. For that reason, Dimwiddie one Sunday morning hastily drew up a resignation letter and left the church. For the next thirty years, the church struggled in decline with a succession of pastors. Stafford Berry was the pastor with the longest tenure, lasting almost fifteen years. During his time, the church bought a parsonage, but used it for rental income.

In 1987 Rick Lawrenson began doing pulpit supply when Berry was unable to be there. In January of 1991, Lawrenson, on the recommendation of Berry, became the interim pastor while Berry dealt with some health issues.

By the spring of 1991, the offerings had tripled. Younger people had begun to attend. In the April business meeting, Berry read his official resignation and in the same

breath, recommended hiring Lawrenson. By May, Lawrenson was working full time for the church.

Lawrenson's first baptism took place in March of 1991, using another church's baptistry. The church experienced significant growth almost immediately. More baptisms happened in the first five months than in the previous 15 years of the church. One of the changes that Lawrenson initiated was a plurality of eldership. This was pursued through the early 1990s, and an elder board was adopted by 1994, being added to the bylaws of the church.

Within the first few years, after turning people away for lack of space, Nags Head Baptist Church added a second service. After continued growth, a third service was added to the Sunday morning schedule, and the Sunday school was moved to Sunday night. After a year, in 1997, the Sunday school was shrinking, and a small group model was adopted to replace it.

In 1998 the church began to adopt the Saddleback model embracing the five purposes of the church as well as the 101, 201, 301, 401, and 501 classes.³ This process took about eight years to fully implement. Through this time the church continued to grow, completing a new building in 2007.

In 2019 the elders began looking for Lawrenson's replacement at his request. I was hired in November 2020, and began a 6-month co-pastorship alongside Lawrenson. One of the main issues facing churches in the Outer Banks area is loneliness. For the most part people have made significant sacrifices over long periods of time in order to

³ These classes are treated as stages in discipleship. The first class is on church membership, the second is the practice of spiritual disciplines, the third class is on serving, and the fourth class is on mission. "Class," Saddleback Church, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://saddleback.com/events/class>.

move to the beach. What they hope to find at the beach is more than sand and water. People move here to get away from crowds, traffic, and the fast-paced life, but the sacrifices to get here are significant.⁴ The average age in Dare County, the county that encompasses the Outer Banks, is 47—nine years above the national average according to the 2019 Dare County census. “Getting away from it all” is inherently an anti-relational goal. In my limited time at the church, helping people who are struggling with loneliness has been a regular occurrence.

The pandemic of 2020 enhanced an already lonely culture. Those who have gotten away from it all find themselves missing the essential element of life as God intended it—relationships of intimacy and strength. For men to grow as well-rounded leaders in their home, community, and church, they need to reinvest in relationships.

Rationale

The purpose of this project was to create a repeatable spiritual growth program through which men gain the relationships, practices, and perspectives necessary for godly living and service. One of God’s most common methods to actuate change in the world is men, specifically men capable of leading: in Genesis He used Noah and the patriarchs, then He used judges and Samuel, followed by Saul and the Davidic line, and after that He used the prophets. At almost every turn God used men as His instruments of change.

⁴ The cost of living on the Outer Banks is high, and yet, aside from commercial fishing and tourism, there is no significant industry. Both fishing and tourism are seasonal in nature, making year-round living financially trying. During the 12-week summer tourist season, over 200,000 unique visitors occupy rental homes in the Outer Banks each week, making long-term home rentals difficult to find. The median household income in 2019 was \$59,381. The median household income in the US in 2019 was \$68,703. “QuickFacts, Dare County, North Carolina, United States Census Bureau,” accessed May 1, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/darecountynorthcarolina/PST045219>.

God’s instruction to the nation of Israel in Deuteronomy 6 calls fathers to lead their children in godly instruction, establishing the responsibility of men to raise godly families. The Apostle Paul mimics this responsibility of fathers in the church as he instructs them to raise their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Male leadership is essential to the structure of the church. In the pastoral epistles, Paul specifically calls for men to lead. This is not to say that God has not or does not use women, but it is to say that men who lead are essential elements in God’s plan. The health of the early church hung on the Holy Spirit’s leading of the men who were at the helm—not only the apostles, but the church leaders they raised up—men like Titus, Luke, Mark, and Timothy. Where these men failed, churches failed and where they succeeded, churches succeeded.

Whether dealing with a nation or a church, a theocracy or a family, God uses men to lead. Essential to any church must be a process by which men are developed into godly leaders in their setting. It is the purpose of this project to create a program that equips men with foundational tools for godly living—tools that can be grown into leadership potential in the future.

Godly male leaders are a universal benefit and worthy goal, but the path to that goal must be contextualized to the needs, tools, strengths and weaknesses of a particular setting. In 2020, society as a whole grew increasingly isolated.⁵ The birth of an online world has greatly inhibited real relationship, so much so that face-to-face conversations are now a learned skill.⁶ Isolation has never been good (Genesis 2), and it is something

⁵ Jamie Ducharme, “Covid-19 Is Making America’s Loneliness Epidemic Even Worse,” *Time*, May 8, 2020, <https://time.com/5833681/loneliness-covid-19/>.

⁶ A. J. Agrawal, “Millennials Are Struggling with Face to Face Communication: Here’s Why,”

God has specifically equipped the church to combat.

Isolation is something the church is not only equipped by God to address, but is in fact antithetical to the healthy functioning of a local body of believers. Paul uses the image of a body to describe the church (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12:12-26). Believers loving one another well in the context of a local church body supernaturally image Jesus: the church is far more than the sum of its parts.

Manhood is under assault today. Retreat from romantic relationships and into pornography, retreat from real employment and into mom and dad's house, retreat from real physical challenges and into the virtual binary challenges of video games. The already fragile male ego has been relentlessly assaulted by culture to the point that insecurities suffocate any real attempt to lead oneself, not to mention engage in the relationships required for leading a family or a church.

Relationships and the skills necessary to maintain them must be foundational to any substantive leadership training for the church today. This is not a new method or teaching—it was certainly Jesus' method with the disciples as they camped together for three years—but it is an old method brought to the fore. Christian love—the model, command, and supernatural ability—has always been central to the church. But this central strength of the church corresponds directly to the cultural weakness of isolation. This is the supernatural ability for which the world is hungering.

Men who can love without defensiveness are enabled to lead without fear. These are men God uses to great effect. “Be strong and courageous, do not fear...”

Forbes, May 4, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ajagrawal/2017/05/04/millennials-are-struggling-with-face-to-face-communication-heres-why/#6dc4ca7926e8>.

(Josh 1:9). The focus of this project is to create a spiritual growth program through which men gain the relationships, practices, and perspectives necessary for godly living and service. From Eden forward, God has called men to lead courageously, humbly, and wisely, yet because of the Fall, men often forfeit this call, becoming foolish, proud, and cowardly. God still calls men to lead in the home, in the workplace, in the church, and beyond. Churches must remind men of this divine calling and find ways to foster such leadership, which is increasingly counter-cultural.

Contemporary Western (American) culture seems to have an aversion to male leadership, in part because men have followed distorted images of masculinity but also because genuine masculine leadership honors God and threatens Satan. Satan's image of masculinity looks like men who prefer isolation to community, adolescence to maturity, pornography to marital intimacy, and entertainment to exertion. While the results of these distortions are especially evident today, they are only modern manifestations of a struggle for manhood that originated in Eden.

Following Adam's pattern, men throughout the Bible fail to lead and protect their hearts and their families, fail to honor fellow image-bearers, prefer the fleeting happiness of sin to the abiding joy of integrity, and thus hide among the baggage rather than stand exposed before God's judgment. Yet through the gospel, God provides a new and better way by giving men a new Adam to image—the Lord Jesus Christ. One mission for the church is to teach men how to follow Jesus' and his earliest disciples' call and example. This project aims to use the means of small-group discipleship to help the men of Nags Head Church grow in this direction.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to create a spiritual growth program through which a select group of men at Nags Head Church develop the relationships, practices, and perspectives necessary to be present with God and others through vibrant relationship. With this groundwork laid, these men will be able to grow into church leaders in the future.

Goals

1. The first goal was to assess the spiritual and relational health of a select group of five men in the Nags Head Church Men's Spiritual Growth Program.⁷
2. The second goal was to develop a Nags Head Church Men's Spiritual Growth Program curriculum focused on prioritizing the importance of love for God and others.
3. The third goal was to increase in love of God and others among a select group of participants in the Nags Head Church Men's Spiritual Growth Program.

Research Methodology

This project employed empirical research methods to measure the success of attaining these goals. The first goal was to assess the spiritual and relational health of a select group of five men in the Nags Head Church Men's Spiritual Growth Program. This ministry project utilized relational health and depth as a metric for maturity. This goal was measured by administering a pre-program relational investment survey.⁸

In 1 John 4, the quality of relationships between believers is given as a metric

⁷ All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethic Committee prior to use in the ethics project.

⁸ See appendix 1.

for maturity. “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:20). Assessing the obedience to God’s command to love another believer is also assessing one’s love for God. This assessment gauged the spiritual health of the men in the spiritual growth group. This goal was considered successfully met when all the participants completed the survey and the results were analyzed. The participants met two weeks prior to the start of the program. At this meeting, expectations for the program were established and the pre-test was administered and collected.

The second goal was to develop a Nags Head Church Men’s Spiritual Growth Program curriculum focused on growing in knowledge and engaging in practices necessary to be present with God and others. This goal was measured by a panel of ministry professionals who utilized a rubric to evaluate the functionality of the program, training elements, and resources.⁹ This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficient level.

The program curriculum development involved selecting books for weekly reading requirements, establishing a format and content for the weekly meetings, creating a program calendar, and setting personal behavioral goals. The personal goals set by each man aimed at removing obstacles to relational intimacy with God and others, as well as adding practices that enhanced intimacy with God and others. There was a specific

⁹ See appendix 3.

emphasis on replacing the distraction and disengagement of screen time activities with face-to-face engagement.

The third goal was to increase knowledge and modify practices of being present with God and others among this select group of participants in the NHC Men's Spiritual Growth Program by running a multi-week program for participants. This goal was measured by administering a post-program survey that measured the change in participants' doctrinal knowledge and practice.¹⁰ This survey was administered two weeks after the conclusion of the program. This goal was considered successfully met when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a statistically significant positive difference in the pre and post survey scores.

Definitions and Delimitations

Relational discipleship. Relational discipleship is discipleship that utilizes the relationships between believers as both a means and metric of spiritual growth.¹¹

Affirming the union between spiritual maturity and relational growth, Joel Comiskey writes, "God desires for us to be dependent on him and interdependent with one another."¹²

Life-death spectrum. This spectrum is a tool designed to encourage open and

¹⁰ See appendix 4.

¹¹ Bill Hull writes, "The reason that most often engagement in serious discipleship has been limited to the few is because discipleship has been program based rather than rooted in relationships of trust." Bill Hull, *Choose the Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 130-131. Similarly, Greg Ogden writes, "First, disciple making is about relational investment. It is walking alongside a few invited fellow travelers in an intentional relationship over time. You will hear this constant refrain: Disciple making is not a program but a relationship." Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship, Revised ed.* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2016), 16.

¹² Joel Comiskey, *The Relational Disciple* (Moreno Valley, CA: CCS Publishing, 2010), 32.

honest conversation among the men in the mentoring program.¹³ Ignorance and fear can make honestly sharing how one is doing difficult. This tool is designed to remedy that problem by looking at the experiences of their lives in the last week and how those experiences affected them.

Chapter two explored how John juxtaposed love for believers with spiritual maturity. The Epistle of 1 John was the delimitation for this project because of John's dedicated focus on this connection between love for God and its demonstration in love for fellow believers.¹⁴

The limitations to this project related to the fact that NHC is an elder-governed church; there could have been decisions made by the elder board which affected the scope or implementation of this project. Such limitations did not affect this project.

Conclusion

The ability to sustain relationships of love and intimacy is essential for the growth and maturity of the believer. Men are losing this ability—an online world offers a chimera of relationships, and if that were not enough, masculinity is increasingly presented in a negative light. The solution to this situation was to retrain men in the art of relationships by providing a program with easy-to-follow steps that rescued them from the distraction of screens, and taught them to love one another. From this foundation men

¹³ See appendix 2.

¹⁴ Allan Brooke writes, "The edification of his [John's] 'children' in the true faith and life of Christians is the writer's chief purpose." And of the audience the letter is addressed to, "Their Christianity had become largely traditional, half-hearted and nominal." A little later Brooke sums up the purpose of the book as one of fellowship with God, stating, "For him the Christian Faith is a life of fellowship 'with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.' His first object in writing is to help his fellow-Christians to lead this life of fellowship, that his joy and theirs might be fulfilled." Canon A. E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* (Greenwood, SC: The Attic Press Inc, 1976), xxvii-xxviii, xxx.

can grow into influential leaders in all spheres. It is my earnest hope this program was such a tool, but if not, may God be gracious and supply rescue through another means.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF A MEN'S SPIRITUAL GROWTH PROGRAM

In this chapter, four passages from 1 John will be discussed. They are, in order: 1 John 4:7-8, 1 John 2:7-11, 1 John 3:12-17, and 1 John 4:9-21. The order in which the passages are addressed is based on what each passage adds to the logical progression of the thesis of this chapter. In brief, 1 John 4:7-8 establishes that God is both love and the Author of the love believers have for one another. First John 2:7-11 establishes that a failure to extend love from believer to believer demonstrates a failure to partake in God's love. 1 John 3:12-17 establishes that love between believers demonstrates not only love for God but intimacy with Him. This foundational material reviewed grants a clear conclusion to the thesis of the chapter found in 1 John 4:9-21, namely that to love God is to love His people, and to love His people is to love Him. Through the discussion of these four passages, it will be shown that loving God's people and loving Him are inseparable. Because of this tight connection, the pursuit of love for God's people is an appropriate medium for spiritual growth, or growing in love for God.

1 John 4:7-8

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Anyone who does not love does not know God,

because God is love.”¹

Introduction

First John 4:7-8 shows that God is love, and the Initiator of the love believers demonstrate. Love is a ubiquitous Christian value and is so important it is found on Christian buildings, bulletins, mission statements, core value statements, and weekly sermon application points. Jesus states that the greatest commandment is to love God and the second is like it, to love others (Matt 22:37-40; Mark 12:28-32). Jesus even claims that these two commandments are the summation of the whole law (Matt 22:40). Jesus also prays about the love of Christians for one another. “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”² Jesus prays that His love will be in believers, that is, experienced and expressed. Churches are on solid biblical ground to emphasize love in everything they do.

And yet the church in America today is in decline. To our great disappointment, there is no connection between the frequency of the word on our materials or the trendiness of the fonts we write it in to the actual practice of love. Perhaps more is required of us than the repetition of the word. The Apostle John, the “Apostle of Love” makes the argument that real Christian love is the product of real intimacy with God.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version.

² John 17:26.

Exegesis

“Beloved” (*agapetos*, a person who is in a special, close relationship with another³) is John’s term for the believers in the churches to whom he is writing. It is a common term in the book, occurring six times in five short chapters.⁴ It is the noun form of the verb *agapao*, “to love.” *Lexham Theological Wordbook* defines the word, “to love, to esteem, to like. *This verb refers to a kind of love that expresses personal will and affection rather than emotions or feelings.*”⁵

The noun and verb are placed immediately next to each other, with both root repetition and alliteration highlighting the topic of the verse. John goes to great lengths to emphasize love. The verb is in an encouragement to act. D. L. Akin says it this way, “He loves them and will now challenge them to love others as well. The reflexive phrase ‘let us love one another’ (*agapōmen*) occurs three times in this passage. Here in v. 7 it is an exhortation...⁶” The mood of the verb is not quite as strong as a command, but that softness might well be due more to the tone of the passage.⁷ In support of the soft tone interpreting the verb, C. G. Kruse says, “He addresses his readers as ‘dear friends’ (*agapētoi*), expressing something of his affection for them and introducing a matter for

³ J. Langford, *Lexham Theological Wordbook: Friendship*, ed. D. Mangum, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, and R. Hurst (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

⁴ John 2:7, 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11.

⁵ R. P. Nettelhorst, *Lexham Theological Wordbook: Love*, ed. D. Mangum, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, and R. Hurst (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

⁶ D. L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 38:177.

⁷ George Strecker concurs, “The injunction to love one another is nothing other than a repetition of the commandment of love of the sisters and brothers enunciated in 3:10-11.” George Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, ed. Harold Attridge (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996), 143.

which he wants their special attention, as he frequently does in this letter.”⁸

But the encouragement is not without reason. In the phrases that follow John is providing the theological basis for the command to love that he has already repeated in two other places in the letter (3:11, 23). John expounds on the implicit reason that the “beloved” should love one another. “For” translates a *hoti* clause, indicating cause or reason. The reason to love is that love is from God, and love demonstrates a relationship with God. Marshall writes, “Thus he begins by grounding his appeal in the fact that love comes from God. It has its origin in God and belongs to the divine sphere.”⁹ Love comes from God. It is how He demonstrates Himself. Though love is not a new topic in the letter, John is adding theological backing to its practice. Yarborough states, “Most of the occurrences [of love] thus far [in the letter] speak of the exercise of love in the ethical sphere...But if John found it necessary earlier to spell out with almost pedantic clarity the command that Christians have had ‘from the beginning’ (2:7-8), it is no wonder that he now moves to fortify the theological foundation of the imperative to love.”¹⁰

The idea of love being sourced in God is central to the verse and the larger argument John is making about love. The preposition *ek* is the Greek word translated “from.” It indicates the idea of origin or source.¹¹ Love emanates from God. It is sourced in Him and no other.

The next phrase, “everyone who loves has been fathered by God,” is not part

⁸ C. G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 156.

⁹ Howard I. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1978), 211.

¹⁰ Robert W. Yarborough, *1-3 John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 235.

¹¹ Yarborough states, “Its supernatural origin in the Father makes it most to be cherished among those who claim to be God’s children.” Yarborough, *1-3 John*, 235.

of the *hoti* clause, meaning it is not a second reason for the beloved to love. It is simply an additional statement about the nature of love and its representation in people.

“Fathered by God” is a phrase used by John to indicate one who has received the free gift of salvation. The verb “born” (*gennaō*) is a perfect active indicative, indicating a completed past action. Judith Lieu writes, “It is only the one who expresses love as it has been urged throughout the letter, ‘let us love one another,’ who is truly in relationship with God, who is love.”¹² Before moving to the next phrase, it is important to note the absolute sense of the verse introduced by the word *pas*, or, “all.” John states that everyone who loves meets the conditions of being God’s child and knowing Him, which is the content of the next phrase.

The last phrase of the verse introduces a second condition of those who practice love. Not only are they children of God (sourced from God, just as love is sourced from God) but also they are in fellowship with God. The verb “to know” translates *ginosko*, meaning, “to know, understand, acknowledge.”¹³ Strecker rightly argues that *ginosko* means “acknowledge,” “This is clear from the last line of the verse: *kai ginoskie ton Theon* does not refer to a theoretical ‘knowing’ or ‘understanding,’ but to acknowledging God.”¹⁴ The verb “to know” is a third person singular present indicative, indicating an ongoing action. The person is a child of God, and knows God. Stephen Smalley keeps these concepts separated, “...he means not only an *attitude* of love (or being loving) but also the *practice* of love. Such love, John maintains, is the test and

¹² Judith Lieu, *1, 2, 3, John* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 178.

¹³ J. K. Garrett, *Lexham Theological Wordbook: Knowledge*, ed. D. Mangum, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, and R. Hurst (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 144.

criterion both of being regenerate and of knowing God.”¹⁵

These two concepts should not be conflated into one.¹⁶ The reason for keeping them distinct is twofold. In verse 8, John says, “Anyone who does not love does not know God.” Here, John does not combine both concepts but focuses on the second of the two conditions of love, knowing God. The tense of the verb “to know” in verse 8 is aorist active indicative, as opposed to the present active indicative of the same verb in verse 7. The present indicative carries the sense of ongoing action, while the aorist carries the sense of presently-taking-place action. Thomas Johnson summarizes well when he says, “The aorist tense of ‘not know’ points not to the past but to the decisive and absolute character of the opponents’ not knowing God.”¹⁷ Akin summarizes the importance of the perfect tense in verse seven well when he states, “The perfect tense of ‘born’ would include the initial rebirth of the individual and the continuing effects this would have in their life, and the present tense of ‘know’ emphasizes that the individual is continuing to grow in knowledge of God.”¹⁸ The distinct timestamp on the same verb, just a few words apart, should not be overlooked. In verse 7, John says that those who love are born (perfect, indicating past action) of God (indicating regeneration) and that they are in a “knowing” relationship with Him (present, indicating ongoing action). In verse 8, John

¹⁵ Stephen S. Smalley, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1, 2, 3 John* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 51:226-227.

¹⁶ Using two words connected by a conjunction to refer to the same concept in Greek is called a hendiadys. Gill argues that the phrases, “being born of God” and “knowing God” combine to refer to the same thing, functioning as a hendiadys. As argued above, there are grammatical and contextual clues which indicate that the terms are not functioning as a hendiadys. John D. D. Gill, *Exposition of The New Testament In Three Volumes* (Paris, Arkansas: The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., 2005), 3:646.

¹⁷ Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Commentary: 1, 2, 3, John*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1993), 10.

¹⁸ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 177–178.

states that those who do not love are *not currently* “knowing” (aorist—indicating immediacy or possibly even an absent time stamp) God. More clearly stated, in verse 7, John is simply saying that those who love have not only been born again, but are walking with God. To love is not just to know God but to be in unhindered fellowship with Him.

If someone does not love, what does that say about his/her relationship with God? John answers that question in verse 8. The subject of verse 8 is implied through the participle “love” in the Greek, and “the one who loves” is a fair translation of the subject.¹⁹ As discussed above, the verb “to know” here is aorist, indicating timeless value. The claim of verse 8 is simply this: anyone who is not demonstrating love, is not, in that moment, knowing God.

John gives a reason for the truth of this absolute statement by supplying another *hoti* clause. The reason they are not knowing God is that “God is love.” If one conflates born of God and knowing God in verse 7, then verse 8 becomes a statement indicating that failure to love is an indication that one is not born again.²⁰ If however, one keeps the terms separated, as I have argued, John is not talking about whether or not one is born again at all (he does not use that language in verse 8). He is simply talking about the idea of knowing God. Even if “love” and “knowledge” are conflated, John chooses the second, more intimate verb in verse 8, meaning that every believer is in intimate relationship with God. Whichever view one adopts, intimacy with God is the point of verse 8.

John Stott captures the point of verse 8 well writing, “For the loveless

¹⁹ Bruce G. Schuchard, *1-3 John* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 438.

²⁰ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 177–178.

Christian to profess to know God and to have been born of God is like claiming to be intimate with a foreigner whose language we cannot speak, or to have been born of parents whom we do not in any way resemble. It is to fail to manifest the nature of him whom we claim as our Father (*born of God*) and our Friend (*knows God*).”²¹

Conclusion

In these verses, John places the expression of Christian *agape* love as a result not only of being one of God’s children, but to walking in fellowship with God. The reason for this is that all love comes from God, being sourced in Him. Without being connected to God, expressing Christian *agape* love is an impossibility. At the same time, the converse is true; being in close relationship with God requires the immediate demonstration of Christian *agape* love. The love Christians share is supernatural—of divine origin. It is the very love of God Himself flowing through us as we enjoy unhindered fellowship with Him. Akin captures the picture well when he writes, “Because his very nature is love, mercy and goodness flow from God like a beautiful river, as sunlight radiates from the sun. Love, real love (cf. 1 Cor 13), has its ultimate source and origin in God.”²²

This passage supports the thesis of this chapter by identifying God as the Author of love. His love does not depart from Himself. If one is to love, one must be partaking in the character of God.

²¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 163-164.

²² Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 178–179.

1 John 2:7-11

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

Introduction

An exegesis of 1 John 2:7-11 shows that failure to love other believers indicates a failure to walk with God. In this passage John makes strong statements about the spiritual condition of “brothers” who hate. The thesis of these verses is that “brothers” who hate “brothers” are not walking with God. There are variant views on the characters in the passage, but what all agree on is that a lack of love for the brothers indicates a lack of love for God.

Exegesis

John begins by addressing his audience with the term *agapetos*, the noun form of the verb to love. Raymond Brown writes, “This covenant designation is carried over into the NT epistles where Christians are God’s beloved who are called saints” (Rom 1:7).²³ Given this designation, the natural reading of the encouragement that follows is that it is directed toward the “saints.”

Before moving on to his “command,” John states that the command is an old

²³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1984), 264.

one. “I am writing to you no new commandment.” The implication of this is that the audience has heard this command before, or in fact, many times before. However, there are distinct views on what “new” refers to. Marshall argues for an explicit reference to John 13:34, “If the readers were familiar with the Gospel, they would know that Jesus had spoken of a ‘new’ commandment (Jn. 13:34), that of mutual love. Clearly this is the commandment which is meant.”²⁴ Boice disagrees, finding instead a reference to Leviticus 19:18, “The command to love is old in that it existed and was known before Christ’s coming. In its simplest form it is found in Leviticus 18:18, which says, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.’”²⁵ Boice makes his argument on the basis of what follows, namely, that John calls the command new in verse 8. Boice sees the contrast between old and new as the contrast between Old Testament teaching and the teaching of Jesus.

The arguments over the passage hinge on the substance of the “beginning” that John referenced in verse 7. If beginning is the beginning of spiritual life, then the command, both new and old elements of it, must be found within the timeline of his audience’s spiritual knowledge/life. If beginning is referencing the beginning of time, or

²⁴ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 129.

²⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 65.

divine revelation, then Boice's reading is more natural.^{26 27}

If John is writing to a Gentile audience to combat Gentile heresies some sixty-five years after the resurrection, the “beginning” he is referencing might well be the beginning of their spiritual life, when they first heard the command to love each other. However, even when they were being taught the full counsel of God for the first time, they would have been told the old command to love, as well as the reiteration of it from Jesus in John 13:34 (contra Derickson).²⁸

If the old command is the command to love one another from John 13:34, then why does John call it new in verse 8? David Allen makes a helpful distinction regarding the word new, *kainos*. “There are two different words for ‘new’ in the Greek New Testament. One means new with respect to time. The other word, the one John uses here means new with respect to quality.”²⁹ New then refers to quality—namely love of greater depth and intimacy. Boice concurs, “It is new in the sense that it was raised to an entirely new emphasis and level by the teaching of Jesus.”³⁰ Boice cites three reasons that the

²⁶ Akin shares the majority position regarding the setting of the Johannine epistles, “Tradition is strong that John spent his latter years in the city of Ephesus ministering to the churches of Asia Minor.” Connected to the location of the letter is the date. Akin continues, “We have already offered internal evidence that would indicate that John was an aged man when he wrote the epistles. It is also the case that church tradition says John was at Ephesus ‘remaining among them permanently until the time of Trajan’ (*Against Heresies*, 3.3.4). Trajan reigned as Roman emperor a.d. 98–117.” Not only was John most likely ministering in a largely Gentile context late in the first century, the opponents he addresses in his letter though hard to identify with great specificity, are in error because of an adherence to *Gentile* philosophies. Rudolph Schnackenburg states, “The Christology of the antichrists in the Johannine epistles also can no longer be described with certainty or precision. But it is one example of that pseudo-Christian tendency which manifested itself in Gnosticism and was such a threat to the church.”

²⁷ Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1992), 23.

²⁸ Gary Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 1982), 163.

²⁹ David Allen, *1-3 John* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 74.

³⁰ Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 65.

love Jesus commanded and exemplified is new: the extent (love for all, not just friends and family), the length (death on the cross), and finally, the degree to which it is realized through the actions of Christ-followers.³¹ The last element of Boice's list is particularly significant. Believers have the ability and responsibility to demonstrate the divine love of God (the extent and the length) toward other believers.³²

John continues his emphasis on the practical demonstration of love in the life of believers in the last phrase of verse 8, "the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining." The present indicative verbs, "pass away" (*parago*) and "shine" (*phaino*) indicate ongoing action. As believers live the love of God, the darkness of the world becomes light.

It is hard to underestimate the theme of illumination in the writing of the Apostle John. John 1:4-5 is the first mention of Jesus as light in John's Gospel, and it is preceded as a description of Jesus only by the statements in 1:1-3 (Jesus as the eternally existing Agent of Creation). The themes of the light/dark dichotomy found in John 1:4-5 ("In him was life, and the life was the light of men.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it") are no doubt part of the context of John's statement in 1 John 2:8. John continues throughout his Gospel to refer to Jesus' role as one who illuminates the dark world.³³ If the new and old command is to love, as has been argued

³¹ Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 65-66.

³² Allen draws on the same idea when he states, "In John 13:35 Jesus continued, 'By this will all people know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' Jesus did not say people will know that we are his followers by our doctrinal orthodoxy but by our love." Allen, *1-3 John*, 75.

³³ John uses a form of light (*phos*) sixteen times in his Gospel. Every reference is to Jesus, and the illumination that He provides. The most significant of these statements is found in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world! The one who follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." John uses the same word five times in 1 John, also exclusively referencing Jesus and the illumination that He provides.

here, the role of practical love from God's people to other people as a revelation of Jesus is firmly established. When a believer loves with God's love, knowledge of God (revelation) is extended and people are drawn to Jesus. This relationship has been established elsewhere in John's writing, namely the High Priestly Prayer. In John 20:23 Jesus prays that all believers will be unified so that the world will know that He is the Messiah. If unity is a practical expression of Christian love, then the connection between love and evangelism is firmly established. Verses 7-8 tie the expansion of the kingdom of God to *agape* love being demonstrated in the life of believers.

Having established that love is a command of Jesus, one that calls forth divine enablement in the extent, length, and practice of love, John makes a firm dichotomy between the practice of love and the practice of hate. One who hates is in darkness, and one who loves is in light. Determinations must be made on who "the one who walks in darkness" is as well as "the one who abides in the light."

Boice finds appropriate determination for the one who does not love his brother in John's opponents whom he labels as Gnostics. "In this verse the reference is obviously to John's Gnostic opponents, as is also the case in the other verses which begin, 'If we claim.'"³⁴ Though Boice does not directly weigh in on the salvation of the person who hates, designating him as a Gnostic certainly implies that this person is not a believer. This perspective is shared by Akin when he writes, "What we have here are persons with visible, though temporary, connection with the church. However, their behavior makes it evident they have never left the darkness. Those they call(ed) brothers

³⁴ Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 67.

they hate (present tense). The conclusion is clear: they are lost. They have never been regenerated.”³⁵ Derickson has a different definition. “In this and the following verses, John will affirm that loving one’s brother demonstrates that one has a healthy relationship (is in fellowship) with God.”³⁶ He unpacks this saying, “By this John is affirming that some *individuals in the body of Christ* can and do claim to be walking in moral purity, and this in fellowship with God (in the light), while hating other Christians” (emphasis mine).³⁷

John’s focus in these verses does not seem to be on determining a litmus test for who is saved and who is not. Boice, in the conclusion of his treatment on this passage, gives three applications of Christian love, one of which is pertinent to this discussion: “First, it will mean that when a Christian has failed to love his brother and has therefore acted wrongly toward him, he will go to him and say he is sorry.”³⁸ Here, Boice recognizes that believers will fail to love their brothers, and they should, in an act of love, seek forgiveness for that failure because it is not in keeping with fellowship with God. If not in his exegesis of the text, then in his application, Boice recognizes that a failure to love is possible for the believer and it is a problem to be rectified. Derickson’s closing argument for identifying the one who hates as a possible member of the body of Christ is compelling. “The problem with this view [identifying the one who hates with John’s opponents] is that John says he hates his “brother,” and the religious opponents are not

³⁵ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 98.

³⁶ Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 169.

³⁷ Derickson, 170.

³⁸ Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 68-69.

believers based on John's description of them in 2:19."³⁹

Following Derickson's position leads to the conclusion that John is dealing with believers in the passage, believers who walk in the light and believers who walk in the darkness. However, it is not only likely, but a given, that those who are not believers are also walking in darkness. This is in fact the force of John's argument—one must live in newness of life, in the pattern and impetus of Jesus. To abdicate this responsibility is to live as though one does not have life (or, in fact, to not have life). Schnackenburg writes, "This is not just an old man constantly repeating himself, nor is it the pedantry of a moralist. No, the problem is so crucial that it surfaces from many different perspectives...Love of brother and sister is the essential prerequisite for fellowship with God."⁴⁰ Love for fellow believers is then a twofold revelation. First, because love is from God, the expression of love reveals one is in fellowship with God. Secondly, because God loves His children, the expression of love for another reveals divine enablement of a human actor.

There are two categories of persons identified in the passage; the believers who love because of intimacy with God and those who do not love and do not have intimacy with God. John states that the one who claims to be "in the light" and hates is either lying or misinformed, "he is still in darkness." That is, he is not walking in fellowship with

³⁹ Derickson continues, "Wescott argues well that this and the other uses of 'brother' in the epistle refer to fellow believers. He notes that 'the title occurs significantly in the first record of the action of the church...and then throughout the apostolic writings (1 Thes 5:26; Gal 2:1; 1 Cor 5:1; Rom 16:14,&c.; 1 Tim 6:2; James 1:9; 1 Pet 5:12 &c; 3:14, 16; 3 John 3, 5, 10)...The singular is characteristic of this epistle, (vv.10, 11, 3:10, 15, 17, 4:20f, 5:16)... There is, as far as it appears, no case where a fellow-man, as man, is called "a brother" in the New Testament.' Others reduce the meaning of brother to "those members of the Johannine Community" in theological agreement with the author (Brown, 84). This should not be seen as a reference to mankind (contra Brooke, 36)." Derickson, 1, 2, & 3 John, 70-71.

⁴⁰ Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 107.

God, his actions are contrary to the actions of God, and are not produced in any way by God.

In contrast to the one living in darkness is the one who loves his brother. John builds his argument on the expression of love or lack thereof. The one who hates declares he is not walking with God, the one who loves is passively declaring that he is walking with God. The ideas of walking with God and Abiding with Him are synonymous.⁴¹ Abiding is a key term for John, and, in the context of the contrast between verses 9-10, abiding stands out. It is absent from verse 9. Derickson states, “Here abiding has the sense of ‘dwelling’ somewhere—in this case in the sphere of light, which is moral purity. This same term is used repeatedly by Jesus in John 15:1-10 where abiding results in mutual relationship (mutual abiding), God’s influence in the lives of believers (fruitfulness), and their influence with God in answered prayer.”⁴² The one who loves is abiding with God. This recalls Jesus’ words on this topic, “apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). A product of abiding in the light is that there is nothing that causes others to stumble. Who then is stumbling in the verse?⁴³ Derickson argues for two implications, “Nothing in the believer himself (including the light) will make him stumble.”⁴⁴ Expressing God’s love for believers, then, has two results. First, it keeps one

⁴¹ Derickson writes, “John now affirms that the person who loves his brother is doing so in the context of God’s character. ‘Abides in the light’ is synonymous with ‘walking in the light’ in chapter 1 and ‘being in the light.’” Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 173.

⁴² Derickson, 174.

⁴³ Akin raises the question implicit in the verse, “Does stumbling take place in the life of the believer, or does the believer cause others to stumble into the darkness?...It is possible that a man might cause others to stumble due to a lack of love, but when this verse is taken with 2:11, it would be best to interpret the clause as referring to the person himself who is stumbling.” Akin, *1,2,3 John*, 99.

⁴⁴ Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 175.

from falling into sin. Hatred toward a brother (or bitterness, or indifference, etc.) will lead one to sin and out of fellowship with God. Second, loving other believers keeps one in fellowship with God.

Verse 11 functions as a summary of the one walking in darkness. Three statements describe the hater: “in darkness,” “walks in darkness,” and “does not know where he is going.” These statements are true because the hater is “blinded by darkness.” Akin defines it this way,

Those who are their brothers live in a state of darkness where there is not just an absence of love, but an absence of God. In this darkness the individual is exiled from fellowship with the Father, his Son Jesus Christ, and the believing community. Far from knowing God, those who hate their brothers walk around confused and lost, not knowing where they are going...Spiritual darkness is not a passive reality. It goes on the offensive.⁴⁵

Darkness is viewed as an active and intelligent force that deliberately tries to obscure its presence while simultaneously drawing one ever further into obfuscation and sin.

Conclusion

John has argued that *agape* love expressed from one person to another reveals that the person is in fellowship with God and fellowship has resulted in God acting in that person. Not only this, failure to love another believer results in sin and a loss of intimacy with God. The practice of loving other believers *keeps the believer from falling into sin*, for the practice of love is divinely authored and motivated—one cannot sin and love. When believers do not love they move away from intimacy with God. When believers love, they move toward greater intimacy with God.

⁴⁵ Akin, *1,2,3 John*, 100.

This passage supports the thesis by connecting the absence of sin to the experience of love between believers. God's love in His people promotes holiness. In addition to this, the passage clarifies that a failure to love another believer is a step away from intimacy with God. Love for God grows as love for believers grows. Failing to move in love toward believers demonstrates movement away from intimacy with God.

1 John 3:12-17

¹² We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. ¹³ Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. ¹⁴ We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵ Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. ¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?

Introduction

An exegesis of 1 John 3:12-17 shows that practical demonstrations of love for believers are practical demonstrations of love for God. In this passage John argues that love within the body of believers is a demonstration of love for God. For an individual to fail to express love for a believer is for that individual to fail to abide in relationship with God. John capitalizes on the gravity of hatred, equating it to murder, and murder is completely contradictory to the character of God.

Exegesis

Cain serves as John's example of what a lack of love looks like. A brief review of the Genesis account of Cain and Abel adds color to John's usage and is necessary as this is the only direct Old Testament reference in this letter. Cain and Abel both came "in the course of time" to offer sacrifices to Yahweh. Both brothers were participating in the

worship of God. Apparently, God had revealed to Adam and Eve something of a sacrificial system prior to Mount Sinai, and the brothers were participating in this system. Sacrificing to God, an act of worship, is the foundation of the first homicide. God was pleased with *both Abel and his offering*, but was displeased with *both Cain and his offering*. The displeasure of God was motivation enough for Cain to murder his brother. Allen writes, “Both were brothers with the same parents. Both brought sacrifices to God. Both sought to worship God. The problem was that Cain’s sacrifice was apparently contrary to God’s specific rules for the kind of sacrifice he should have brought.”⁴⁶

The reader must note that the Cain and Abel account does not occur in the absence of God, or in some way as an activity far separated from Him. Rather, God is intimately involved with Cain specifically through the whole circumstance.⁴⁷ Not only is an act of worship the foundation of the narrative, but God speaks to Cain to warn him of the hatred in his heart. “And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.”⁴⁸ The personification of sin in this passage must be recognized. K. A. Matthews captures the importance of this well:

The REB thus reads, ‘Sin is a demon crouching at the door.’ If there is an allusion to the door demon, then the narrative is personifying sin as a demonic spirit ready to pounce on Cain once he opens the ‘door’ of opportunity. This may well correspond with the ‘seed’ of the serpent in 3:15, which will do battle with the ‘seed’ of the

⁴⁶ Allen, *1,2,3 John*, 152.

⁴⁷ I am not here arguing that Cain was a believer, nor do I believe that John wants the reader to draw that conclusion. However, John is using the Cain and Abel account to illustrate intimacy. Just because someone is “in the family” does not mean that person is carrying out God’s will, or in fact rightly bears that title. There will be many who claim to be in the family of God who are not, and their deeds will demonstrate their true loyalty. There will also be those who are in the family whose deeds at times, are not of God. The Apostle Peter is a suitable illustration of this on two accounts (Matt 16:23, Gal 2:11). Though John clearly distinguishes those who are in the faith and those who are not in this letter, that is not the point of this passage. This passage is about the importance of practicing love for the brothers, and the evil of not practicing love for the brothers.

⁴⁸ Gen 4:7.

woman Eve. The imagery is effectively the same and the message clear: sin can be stirred up by wrong choices.”⁴⁹

God expects Cain to overcome the evil he is facing, and that evil is personified, with Satan as at least the indirect reference.

For John’s purposes, Cain’s story is directly applicable. There is the intimacy of brothers in a family. There is also the setting of relationship with God—in Cain it was an offering that aroused his hatred, while John’s opponents seem to be identifying disregard of believers as an acceptable way to treat believers while in relationship with God. John also draws application from the story. Cain murdered his brother because his brother’s righteous deeds revealed his own unrighteousness.

The jealousy of Cain, which was provoked by Abel’s righteousness, is a useful image for John, particularly the motive behind the murder of Abel. Stott writes, “Jealousy-hatred-murder is a natural and terrible sequence.”⁵⁰ Jesus has much to say on these topics, which Boice brings to light, drawing on Matthew 5:21, 22, and Mark 7:21-23, when he writes, “Consequently a person is guilty before God for heart attitudes as much as for the outward, visible actions that flow from his sin. By God’s definition hatred is as much murder as the unlawful taking of another’s life.”⁵¹ In other words, John has just taken the lack of love for a believer (see verse 11) and presented murder as the other option.⁵² The hatred of the world should be expected in light of the fact that

⁴⁹ K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 1A: 270-271.

⁵⁰ Stott, *The Letters of John*, 144.

⁵¹ Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 114.

⁵² Based on personal assurance of salvation, one might well think that the murder mentioned here is not personally possible. Such a conviction is not merited. Lack of love and hatred are the options in the text, there is no third option. At the very least the conviction of lack of love, if and when it occurs,

righteous behavior causes jealousy, hatred and murder. John affirms this—do not be surprised by the hatred of the world.

John’s next move is to explain what love for the brothers demonstrates, namely the move from the realm of death to the realm of life. Derickson writes, “John states that a means for believers to assure themselves of their salvation using the contrast of two spheres: life and death.”⁵³ John’s inclusive language, “*We* know that *we* have passed...” no doubt refers to all believers, John included. The past tense of the verb is referring to the moment of salvation. Marshall writes, “He is implicitly asserting that once his readers were in a state of death, from which they have not been transferred to life. John never suggests that some people are by nature endowed with spiritual life; on the contrary, a process of spiritual birth is necessary.”⁵⁴

The second half of verse 14 evokes an interpretive question. What does the phrase, “whoever does not love abides in death” mean? Marshall represents one argument well when he writes, “We find the basis in a saying in the Gospel: ‘I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life’ (John 5:24). It follows that the converse is true: the person who does not show evidence of loving his brothers is still in the realm of darkness and death.”⁵⁵ This argument gains support from the tense of the verb.⁵⁶ The present tense leads some to conclude that the person in question has never

should be significant and alarming.

⁵³ Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 344.

⁵⁴ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 190.

⁵⁵ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 191.

⁵⁶ Smalley writes, “Once more the present tense of the verb μένει [menei] indicates a

experienced new birth.⁵⁷ In contrast, Derickson writes,

The unloving person, believer or not, “abides” in the sphere of death...Death is a sphere of existence that may be associated with separation from fellowship with God. So abiding in death is parallel to walking in darkness in Chapter 1. For the unregenerate, it is an absolute separation from God’s presence. For the regenerate, it is the experience of social separation from God, a breakdown in fellowship without a loss of family membership.⁵⁸

Derickson presents the better argument. The present active indicative in Greek indicates a state or ongoing action without reference to past events, thus Akin pushes the tense too far when he writes, “This state of spiritual death is one into which a person is born and continues to exist.”⁵⁹ The effect of Derickson’s view is that even a believer may fail to love, but when he does, he is out of fellowship with God.⁶⁰

This sense of abiding carries through to verse 15, where John clearly restates the reality of a “believer” who does not love fellow believers. Here John equates hatred with murder and murder as evidence that one does not have eternal life abiding in him. There is nothing new in this statement, but rather a summarizing of the argument that John has been making in the previous verses, and is also referring to common traditions

continuous state of spiritual death on the part of the person (heretical or unbelieving) who refuses to love.” Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 190.

⁵⁷ Akin writes, writing, “On the other hand, the absence of Christian love indicates that one has not passed into the state of spiritual life but remains (menei) in the realm of spiritual death. They walk in the darkness, not in the light. This state of spiritual death is one into which a person is born and continues to exist if regeneration does not occur (cf. Eph 2:1).” Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 157.

⁵⁸ Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 348.

⁵⁹ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 157.

⁶⁰ He concludes, “Strecker (112) describes this last statement as antithetical to the first portion of the verse. Rather than saying they are dead, John again uses μένω [men'-o] to describe their experience (113). He sees this as a stronger term than ἐστίν, and notes that John used μένω [men'-o] similarly in 3:9 to describe God’s seed ‘abiding’ in the believer rather than just ‘being’ in him. Thus they are experiencing death as a ‘continuing existence.’” Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 349.

known at the time, those of Cain and Abel as well as institution of the death penalty in Genesis 9.⁶¹

What must not be missed is John's statement that everyone who hates is a murderer. Stott sees the individual who hates as an unregenerate person. "...clearly anyone who hates his brother does not possess eternal life either, because to hate is to be a murderer. This is a faithful echo of the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount."⁶² In contrast Derickson states, "...It is better to see that one cannot hate his Christian 'brother' without being a Christian as well. Thus, what John is saying is not an issue of justification. Rather, John is saying that "eternal life," either in the person of Christ or as a personification of the quality of life, is not having an influence in the believer's life."⁶³ The practical experience of believers confirms this. Love is the result of fellowship with God. Hatred is a demonstration of a broken relationship with God.⁶⁴

John uses the selfless love of Jesus as the example of love that believers are to express to one another.⁶⁵ Akin states the nuance well when he writes, "Although the

⁶¹ Strecker writes, "In this verse, however, the general term for 'murderer' is deliberately chosen; it recalls the Noachic law (Gen 9:6: 'whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed'). The equation of hatred with murder derives from a broad ethical tradition." Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 113.

⁶² Stott, *The Letters of John*, 146.

⁶³ Derickson continues, "Eternal life motivates no one toward hatred, but rather toward love. Here as in other places with John, μένω [men'-o] is a term describing influence more than presence. Pentecost states John's point well: "John is not saying that a saved man cannot hate. He is not saying even that a saved man cannot kill, because he can and does. What John is saying is that no man who is controlled by the new life of Christ can hate....One can be saved and hate, but one cannot be living by the power of the new life of Christ and hate at the same time." Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 350-351.

⁶⁴ John will go on to describe hatred as something as seemingly mild as indifference in chapter 4. Hatred, anger in the heart, is murder. This was characterized by Jesus as simply thinking the phrase, "you idiot" (Matt 5:22). Such thinking is possible for believers, but condemned by Jesus.

⁶⁵ Kruse explains, "The readers are people who know what love is because they know that Jesus Christ laid down his life for them. The sort of love exemplified in Christ's death is love which expends itself in the interests of others." Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 137.

preposition *huper* ('for') is often used to refer to the substitutionary nature of the atonement (cf. John 11:50; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13), John's primary concern is to stress the exemplary aspect of Christ's sacrifice. As Hiebert explains: 'Since one's life is an individual's most precious possession, Christ's willingness to lay down that life on behalf of others constituted the greatest possible expression of love.'⁶⁶ The knowledge that believers have of love, is based on Jesus' sacrifice and grown through diligent effort.⁶⁷ Any encounter with Jesus is based on His sacrifice on the cross, the most significant demonstration of love in the human story.

The example of Jesus is to motivate believers to follow in His footsteps. John states, "we ought to lay down our life for the brothers." Stott states, "By the sacrifice of Christ is not just a revelation of love be admired; it is an example to copy. *We ought* (i.e., we should be willing) *to lay down our lives for our brothers*; otherwise our profession to love them is an empty boast (italics his)."⁶⁸ This statement adds to the definition of love to which John refers throughout the letter. The love that believers have experienced is of Jesus dying in their place (substitutionary atonement), and that example is what believers are supposed to follow. Believers follow this example by laying down their lives for each other. This sacrifice by believers for each other does not atone for sin or in any way mitigate the beloved's relationship with God. That is not the example to which John refers. It is instead the sacrificial nature of Christ's death. Strecker states, "Those who are

⁶⁶ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 158–159.

⁶⁷ Akin writes, "The verb 'we know' (egnokamen) refers to a knowledge that has been gained through diligent contemplation. It is an acquired understanding. The perfect tense emphasizes a historical encounter with Christ with ongoing results that affect one's present life." Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 158.

⁶⁸ Stott, *The Letters of John*, 147.

touched by the love of God may not withdraw from their obligation to make the love they themselves have experienced a reality for others. Such a self-sacrifice is owed first of all to the brothers and sisters, and thus is an intracommunity phenomenon.”⁶⁹

Verse 17 is where all the theology John has been developing comes to direct application. In contrast to exemplifying the love of Jesus advocated in verse 16, John begins verse 17 with a contrasting preposition, *δέ*. The contrast to the sacrificial love of Jesus is the stinginess of one who has the world’s goods and does not share them with those in need. Stott writes about the brother with worldly goods, “...he is in debt [to the one in need].”⁷⁰ Failure to meet the need of his brother is an indication that the love of God is not abiding in him.⁷¹ John moves his application from a moment of fatal sacrifice to a mode of generous living. But the level of generous living should be very sacrificial.⁷²

John asks a rhetorical question regarding the brother who closes his heart to another brother. The most significant issue of his question is what “the love of God” means. Derickson lays out the options:

(1) As a subjective genitive, it would describe love coming from God (Brown, 451; Bultmann, 56; Burdick, 270; Houlden, 101; Stott, 144). (2) As an objective genitive, love would be expressed toward God (Brooke, 97; Bruce, 101; Lieu, 152). (3) It may be a plenary genitive (both objective and subjective) and communicate both ideas (Wescott, 115). (4) As a descriptive genitive (genitive of quality) it would express God’s kind of love, God-like love (Marshall, 194). It seems the subjective genitive is best because this love received by the believer is supposed to impact

⁶⁹ Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 115.

⁷⁰ Stott, *The Letters of John*, 147.

⁷¹ Smalley summarizes the argument well, “Anyone who (a) has material possessions, (b) takes note of a needy person, (c) and then deliberately draws back from offering assistance, cannot be said to possess the love of God.” Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 195.

⁷² Allen writes, “First, he speaks of having ‘the world’s goods.’ The word in Greek is *bios*, and conveys the meaning of ‘livelihood.’ John does not describe someone here who is rich in this world’s goods, but the average, ordinary person who has the basics of livelihood at his disposal and could help someone in need.” Allen, *1,2,3 John*, 157.

him.⁷³

Derickson's argument makes good sense and is well represented by other commentators. Thus, John's question is simply this: How can God's love be in the one who refuses generosity to his brother?

John's question is expecting a negative answer, in other words, John is stating that the experience of God's love is not being enjoyed by the one who refuses to help a brother in need. The positive of this assertion is that God's love, as the governing authority in the believer, must overflow in its expression to other believers.⁷⁴ John's point is simply this, that if a believer is abiding in fellowship with God, God's own love will flow through that believer to other believers, because that is the very heart of God. God is love (1 John 4:8), and to walk with God is to love other believers.

Conclusion

John has showed that hatred and murder are antithetical to God's presence. More than that, the world embodies hatred for God's people, and yet, God's people embody His love. To fail to love is to fail to be in fellowship with God. But to love by living generously is to embody the love of God, to experience it and express it. Further, loving others is an expression of loving God. It is important to note here, that the actual love for the believer is not an expression of love for God directly—the other believer is

⁷³ Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 358.

⁷⁴ "For just as the believer is called to abide in God through Christ (2:24), and God remains in him (4:13) so the divine love itself should 'dwell' in and flow from the genuine disciple of Jesus." Malley, *1,2,3 John*, 198.

not God. Believers love other believers not because of who the beloved is, but because of what God has done in the life of the lover.

One step of inference from the text proves the thesis of this chapter. John elsewhere defined love for God as obedience (John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments”).⁷⁵ If obedience to Jesus is loving him, and obedience as defined here in 1 John is to abiding in and expressing the love of God to another believer, then loving other believers is loving God with God’s love.

1 John 4:9-21

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; 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. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for 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. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Introduction

An exegesis of 1 John 4:9-21 shows that believers fill up the expression of God’s love for His children by expressing His love to each other. In this passage John draws to a conclusion his argument about the inseparable tie between love for “brothers”

⁷⁵ John 14:15.

and love for God. The tie between loving God and loving the brothers will be so tight that it cannot be separated—one cannot love the brothers without loving God, and one cannot love God without loving the brothers. To love God is to love the brothers, and to love the brothers is to love God. Because of the length of this passage, this exegetical will focus on verses 12, 16, 19, 20, and 21. The intervening verses will be covered in summary fashion.

Exegesis

In verses 9-10, John argues that God demonstrated His love for people by sending Jesus to die for their sins, so that people could enjoy eternal life. This love of God was not precipitated by meritorious action on the part of people, but rather when people were in the state of justly deserving God’s wrath. God is always the Initiator, Author and Sustainer of love.⁷⁶

Verse 11 applies the example of God’s love as a motivating factor and example of the love. Even though God’s love was extended through Jesus to an unmeriting audience, that love should not stop there but continue to flow to others.⁷⁷ Boice makes the amazing and selfless nature of God’s love explicit, “Who are those for whom Christ died? Not lovely people by God’s reckoning, but sinners, those who have rebelled against God and hated Him. Indeed, they were those who would crucify His Son out of hatred for

⁷⁶ Akin writes, “Further, God’s love is primary, not ours. The death of Christ is extolled, not the birth. John, in concluding the verse with the phrase ‘our sin’ (tōn hamartiōn hēmōn), is keenly aware of his own need as well as ours for this propitiatory act. Our act was to sin. God’s was to love and send.” Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 180.

⁷⁷ Kruse agrees, “The author is not giving a lesson about the love of God for its own sake, but to show that God’s love for us must cause us to love one another.” Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 161.

Him, and such are we all.”⁷⁸ The nature of love between believers that John is referencing is encapsulated in the first word of verse 11, “beloved.” This is the adjective form of the noun, *agape*. This sort of love, as has been mentioned earlier, is selfless and self-sacrificing, and is embodied by Jesus.

The result of embodying the love of God is what John addresses next.

Concerning verse 12, Boice writes, “The reply of this verse is almost breathtaking, for it is John’s clear statement that although God cannot be seen in Himself, He can be seen in those in whom He abides and in Whom His love is perfected.”⁷⁹ Boice emphasizes the demonstration in the actions of the lover, not the reception of love by the beloved. His point is that when a believer loves, God’s love is being seen or *revealed*. Sight is one of the most important themes in all of John’s writings, Jesus is not only the revelation of the Father, but also brings light to all men.⁸⁰

Regarding the indwelling of God evidenced by love for the brothers, John uses *menō*, the same word for remain as has been commented on earlier. Rather than remain in God, John says God is remaining, or abiding in the believer who loves. This indwelling of God, evidenced by love, has dramatic consequences.

⁷⁸ Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 142.

⁷⁹ Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 143.

⁸⁰ Kruse summarizes John’s Gospel on this topic: The invisibility of God is an important theme in the Fourth Gospel (“No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known” [John 1:18]; “And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form” [John 5:37]; “No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father” [John 6:46]). The author’s statement about the invisibility of God reproduces the statement found in John 1:18, with only minor variations. The author’s point, then, is that while no one can claim to have seen God (apart from God’s one and only Son) believers who love one another demonstrate that the unseen God lives in them. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 161-162.

The phrase “His love is perfected in us” refers to the completion of the love of God.⁸¹ Stott makes this bold explicit when he writes:

It would be hard to exaggerate the greatness of this conception. It is so daring that many commentators have been reluctant to accept it and have suggested that the genitive in His love is not subjective (“God’s love”) but objective (our love for God; cf. 2:5) or definitive (“Godlike love”). But the whole paragraph is concerned with God’s love and we must not stagger at the majesty of this conclusion. God’s love, which originates in Himself (7-8) and was manifested in His Son (9-10), is made complete in His people (12). It is “brought to perfection within us” (NEB). God’s love *for* us is perfected only when it is reproduced *in* us or (as it may mean) “among us” in the Christian fellowship.⁸²

That we have a role in completing the love of God is an earth-shattering claim. John is here writing that by loving God’s people, we love Him.⁸³ We should not hesitate to describe love for a fellow believer as love for God. What must be understood in this statement is a clear orthodox understanding of God. What is not being said is that the other person is God, or even that to love the other person is to love God in the other person, but simply that loving others is a direct demonstration of love for God. To love others is to love God.

Filling up the love of God deserves special note. Derickson is helpful on this point, “God’s love in us attains its goal only as we exercise it within the body of Christ toward fellow believers. ‘The manifestation of active love by men witnesses to two facts: (1) the abiding of God in them, and (2) the presence of divine love in them in its most complete form. There is both the reality of fellowship and the effectiveness of

⁸¹ 1 John 4:12.

⁸² Stott, *The Letters of John*, 167.

⁸³ Smalley unpacks that demonstration further by stating, “Before he makes this point, however, the writer explains the form of the love command in v 11 (we are to love others, not God, in response to the divine love). For the fact is that, ‘no one has ever seen God,’ and by loving other people we are indeed loving him.” Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 243-244.

fellowship' (Wescott, 151).”⁸⁴ To fill up the love of God is to abide with Him, allowing His love for others to flow you into action for them. “Perfected” love does not mean without fault, it simply means attaining to its goal, or completed.

Verses 13-15 give three other evidences of the remaining (*menō*) in God. Verse 13 claims first that the abiding relationship with God is reciprocal. The believer who abides in God has God abiding in him. There is no one-sidedness to that relationship. The evidence of remaining in Him is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In verse 14 a second evidence for the same fact is given—those who have seen and give testimony to the Father’s sending of Jesus as the Savior of the world are those who are remaining with God. In verse 15, the final evidence of indwelling is the confession of Jesus’ deity. The Spirit’s presence, the Father’s sending, and the Son’s identity form a three-legged proof of indwelling.

Verse 16 advances John’s argument to the practical conclusion of what abiding in God looks like. Kruse gives a helpful explanation of the “knowing and believing language,” “The expression ‘know and rely on’ (*egnōkamen kai pepisteukamen*) appears to be a hendiadys, that is, the use of two words to express essentially one idea.”⁸⁵ To know God’s love is to find it reliable. What cannot be divorced from this concept is that John is talking about the practical experience of the love of God based on what Jesus did at the cross.⁸⁶ Believers give the real, practical, experienced love of God when they walk

⁸⁴ Derickson, 1, 2 & 3 John, 447.

⁸⁵ Kruse, *The letters of John*, 165.

⁸⁶ Marshall points out, “The believer is sure of his faith because he has personally experienced the love of God. He has come to know and also to put his trust in it.” Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 221.

with God, loving Him and others.⁸⁷ Thus, the love of God is not mere doctrine or theory, it is a lived experience of God's active presence through the Holy Spirit's work.

In the conclusion of verse 16 John returns to a theme he has previously stated in verse 8, God is love. Smalley, relating back to verse 8 sees this as an affirmation of the divine essence, "love as the essence of the divine nature."⁸⁸ The force of this statement is that the indwelling presence of God is of such quality as to share in a divine characteristic. Smalley continues, "It shows us not only that God loves us, but also that he *is* love. John picks up that thought from v 8, and adds to it the idea of mutual indwelling (the believer in God, and God in the believer)."⁸⁹

John returns to a favored verb, *menō*, in the qualifications that lead to the love of God being expressed in the believer. A believer must be walking in continued submission to God to enjoy and express God's love.⁹⁰ The fact that experiencing and expressing the love of God depend on remaining in Him must not be overlooked. While the expression of *agape* love is required of all believers, a full and faithful expression of this love may be expected of those who have faithfully walked closely with God.⁹¹ Verse

⁸⁷ Such an interpretation is followed by Derickson who states, "Thus God's love is 'expressed in believers.' He [Harris] points to 3:15 and 5:10 where *ἔχω* [*echo*] is used with *ἐν* [*en*] 'which literally refer to something 'in' someone.'" Derickson, *1, 2 & 3 John*, 458-459.

⁸⁸ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 256.

⁸⁹ Smalley, 256.

⁹⁰ Akin comments helpfully summarize this point. "It must be stated that the previous characteristics and qualifications are still required. Speaking of the love of God, as many often do, is not enough. The confession of the incarnate Christ and acknowledgment of his atonement and Lordship are necessary. Without this combination, this mutual abiding is not possible. The fact that the word 'abide' (*menō*) occurs three times in the Greek text underscores this point." Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 185.

⁹¹ Smalley follows the point well, "'Living in love' means remaining in union with God and also expressing this relationship in practical love for others. In these terms Christian experience is neither subjective nor traditional. For the writer (perhaps in opposition to those heretically-inclined members of his congregation who undervalued love of any kind) places equal emphasis on 'love to God, which is the heart of religion, and love to man, which is the foundation of morality' (Dodd, 118; see 116-18) (*italics mine*)."

16 ties together the love of God and the love of believers so that one cannot in any way claim to know God or have fellowship with Him who does not have genuine love for believers. John has elevated the love of believers to the same significance of loving God.

In verse 17, John returns to a theme of confidence in the face of judgment. Practicing love, which requires the indwelling of God as well as dwelling in Him, brings us confidence. The reason for this confidence is that believers who even now dwell in God are embodying Him on earth. This is not to say believers are perfect, but that we are becoming in time what we will be fully in eternity.⁹²

Verse 18 builds on the topic of confidence by splitting it up into a fear/love dichotomy. The fear John mentions is fear of eternal condemnation in hell. Love for God casts out all fear of eternal damnation.⁹³ If one is a believer and still lives in fear of hell, then God's love has not been perfected in that person—they are not walking in fellowship with God.⁹⁴ Having applied the eschatological reality to abiding in God's love, John moves on to summarize the importance of love in the life of the believer in verses 19-21.

Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 256.

⁹² Derickson handles the difficult question of the way in which we resemble Jesus now when he writes, "We probably have here another example of that portrayal of the 'eschatological reality' of the Christian life which we found particularly in 3:6, 9; John is stating the characteristic which ought to be found in every true Christian, namely that he is like Jesus, but this is not incompatible with his urging his readers to let the ideal become a reality. Were it not so, our grounds for confidence might seem very slender and fitful." Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 223-224.

⁹³ Kruse writes, "Love for God and fear of God cannot coexist (cf. Rom 8:15). The type of fear the author is speaking about is revealed in 4:18b when the author explains why there is no fear in love: because fear has to do with punishment. The type of fear meant here is fear of punishment (emphasis his)." Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 168.

⁹⁴ Kruse continues, "When people fear God's punishment, it is a sign that they have not yet been perfected in love: The one who fears is not made perfect in love. Perfection in love here involves a love for God which is based upon our sense of God's love for us, and this love relationship is what removes our fear as we face the day of judgement(emphasis his)." Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 168-169.

John reminded his readers that it was not fear that led them to respond to God, but love; likewise, it is not fear that grants confidence in the day of judgment, but love. The main instrument God uses to bring us back to a true relationship of love is not fear of His judgment but the fact of His love.⁹⁵

Several relevant questions arise from verse 19. The first is the mood of the verb “to love.” The indicative is preferred to the imperative because John is making an argument, not issuing applications.⁹⁶ The object of love is the second relevant question. No object is supplied in the text, but the options, based on the context, would be love of God or love for believers. While Smalley sees this love as a general ability, Derickson agrees but makes a great argument for a double meaning—John wants his audience to love God and each other.⁹⁷ Given John’s penchant for double meaning, Derickson’s leaning is the best. Verse 19 reminds the audience that the love they express is based completely on the initiating love of God to which they are responding.

The conclusion of the chapter turns to a very helpful and specific criteria for determining if one is truly motivated by love for God or not, truly responding to God’s initiatory love or not. Smalley writes, “John returns to his attack on the heretical members and ex-members of his community; but this time his concern is not so much with their

⁹⁵ Marshall writes, “We love because he first loved us. Our love for God is based on God’s prior love for us, and is thus the response of gratitude.” Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 225.

⁹⁶ Smalley argues convincingly for the indicative, stating, “But almost certainly ἀγαπῶμεν [*agapōmen*] should be construed as an indicative (against Law, Tests, 402; Schnackenburg, 249). John is making a profound statement about the practice of love: that human love is a response to divine love, and that it rests on ‘something greater and stronger than our own powers’ (Brooke, 125; cf. Rom 5:5).” Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 262.

⁹⁷ “We are to love both God and one another (Haas, de Joge, and Swellengrebel, 130; Harris, 199). John seems to enjoy the double meaning and appears to have used it here in a similar way as in 1:7 concerning mutual fellowship that was equally ambiguous. This double sense fits best with what has been said and will be said in the remainder of the epistle.” Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 472.

doctrinal beliefs (cf. 4:1–3, 6) as with their ethical behavior.”⁹⁸ John’s teaching is wonderfully practical and helpful in determining the legitimacy of the new “teachers.” John is expecting that his audience will be able to judge, distinguishing between the one who loves and the one who doesn’t.⁹⁹ The point at issue is whether or not an individual is demonstrating quantifiable love for other believers. If the person in question is not demonstrating love, that person is not loving God—the claim made at the beginning of the verse (“if anyone claims to love God”) being proved false.

If one is making the claim to love God, but demonstrating a lack of love for believers, that person is a liar.¹⁰⁰ Demonstrating a lack of love is not just reserved for the (relatively rare for American believer) situation where a Christian needs a meal or clothes. A lack of love is also demonstrated by apathy toward the needs of others—not just in emotion, but also in action.¹⁰¹ “Mild unconcern” is a high standard, one easy to miss amid the busy-ness of life. And yet, if the love of God is in us, and being exercised through us, those who are in need will be seen and loved by us.

⁹⁸ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 262–263.

⁹⁹ Akin agrees, stating, “One may possibly claim to love God and deceive others since God cannot be seen and others are not able to prove the truth of the declaration. The visible manifestation of an individual’s love for God, however, will eventually show up in his dealings with his brothers and sisters in Christ, who indeed are very visible.” Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 187.

¹⁰⁰ Derickson writes on the term “liar,” “This same term is used to describe the person who claims to know God while not obeying Him (2:4), who denies that Jesus is the Christ (2:22)—the first a believer, the second an antichrist. So John does not describe this person as deceived like he had the one making false claims about sin in 1:8. He is also not like the believer who has hated his own brother and has been walking in darkness, unaware of his own blindness (2:9-11). Rather, this is a statement of his character. He is not just lying. He is a liar.” Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 474.

¹⁰¹ Derickson is also helpful on the metric used to judge the liar, “This is the one who by nature does not love his Christian brother. He has already described this lack of love in terms of refusing to meet physical needs (3:17). Thus hating another Christian is not an emotion directed toward someone. It is what we do and can be something as ‘mild’ as unconcern.” Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 475.

John’s argument moves from the lesser to the greater at the conclusion of verse 20.¹⁰² John’s point is that it is more difficult to love Someone invisible than it is to love someone visible. Smalley expands on this idea, bringing into it the basis for judgment, “The fact that God is invisible means that a claim to love him can be neither proved nor disproved. But no deception is possible in the case of our fellow-men, since the nature of any relationship with them can be easily tested (although appearances, even among people, can still deceive!).”¹⁰³ The claim to love God, if isolated from human relationships, cannot be validated. But the love of believers can be validated, and should be. It is important to remember that opening claim John is addressing, one who claims to love God. That claim, while hating fellow believers, demonstrates the character of the claimant—he is a liar. Smalley concludes, “To withhold the one is to render the other impossible. We are to love God in others, and others in him. Such is the meaning of ‘living in love’ (v 16).”¹⁰⁴

Verse 20 reiterates the importance of love as it relates to the Christian life by drawing upon Jesus’ words, specifically those recorded in the Upper Room Discourse in the Gospel of John.¹⁰⁵ Jesus’ command to His followers, especially as recorded in the Fourth Gospel, is unavoidable. Love is the initiating cause of Christianity, and the *sine*

¹⁰² Kruse writes, “This is an a fortiori statement, arguing from the lesser to the greater. If people cannot carry out the lesser requirement (to love their fellow believers whom they have seen), they cannot carry out the greater requirement (to love God whom they have not seen). The nature of the true experience of God is such that it cannot exist without manifesting itself in love for God’s people.” Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 170.

¹⁰³ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 263.

¹⁰⁴ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 264.

¹⁰⁵ Kruse states, “Here the author picks up a major theme from the Last Supper discourse in the Fourth Gospel, where Jesus stresses that his disciples’ love for him must express itself in obedience to his command, and that his command is that they should love one another (John 13:34; 14:15; 15:12; 15:17).” Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 170.

qua non of the practice of following Jesus. Akin makes the connection wonderfully explicit, “The reason that it is impossible for the inconsistency stated in 4:20 to remain is that the command to love God and *the command to love one’s brother are two parts of one command*. They are inseparable. In fact, the use of ‘and’ (*kai*) to begin the verse connects it with the prior verse” (emphasis mine).¹⁰⁶ The inseparability of love for God and love for people must not be overlooked as one of (or perhaps the most) essential combinations of the inner relationship with God and its external demonstration.

Conclusion

John has shown that growing in intimacy with God requires growing in intimacy with fellow believers. Further, to grow in love for fellow believers is to grow in love for God. Pursing love for fellow believers apart from God is a futile pursuit. But growing in practical demonstrations of love and intimacy toward other believers is a demonstration, metric, and practical means to enhance one’s walk with God.

The significance of loving people as a reflection of one’s relationship with God is not made only in John’s writing. Paul wrote in Galatians 5:14, “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Jesus himself combines the same two elements in Mark 12:30-31, “‘And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

¹⁰⁶ Akin, 1, 2, 3 John, 187.

Conclusion

Four truth statements can be distilled from the writing above. 1) Loving believers is perfecting the love of God in us (v. 12). 2) Abiding in fellowship with God is abiding in His experienced and expressed love (v. 16). 3) Loving God and others is a response to God's initiatory love and indwelling. 4) The claim to love God can and should be validated in a believer's life by quantifiable efforts to meet the needs of believers in want.

What can be distilled from these four statements is this principle—believers can pursue greater intimacy with God by loving other believers. If failure to love believers is a failure to love God, and if loving other believers is an act of loving God, and if loving God cannot be separated from loving believers, and if loving God is the great commandment, then, as Smalley stated, “We are to love God in others, and others in him. Such is the meaning of ‘living in love’ (v 16).”¹⁰⁷ Believers can pursue an active path of loving each other as a means to spiritual growth. Such a plan will doubtless lead them to the end of their natural affections for one another and into the supernatural love of God. A statement from Smalley sums this up well, “. . .by loving other people we are indeed loving him.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 264.

¹⁰⁸ Smalley, 243-244.

CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL, PRACTICAL, AND HISTORICAL
RESOURCES FOR THE PROJECT

Introduction

In the past thirty years, literature designed to help Christian men in their pursuit of Jesus has expanded significantly. Promise Keepers ministry began in 1990, publishing its first book, *What Makes a Man*, in 1992. This ministry began an effort to reach the men who were dealing with the unique challenges of the 90s—unique because they had not existed previously.

The new men’s ministry was devoured by millions of men. In 1997, Promise Keepers held a Stand in the Gap event in Washington, D.C. This event alone (there were many other events with tens of thousands of men in attendance throughout the 90s) drew over half a million men. Though Promise Keepers by no means started men’s ministry, it did open up a new enthusiasm in the arena of men’s ministry, prompting numerous books and self-help programs. What was going on in the world that made a ministry to men so well received?

Feminism had something to do with what happened to the way men understood themselves. *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963, beginning “second wave feminism,” which then birthed many other iterations of the feminist movement.¹ In the

¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd., 2001).

1970s, “materialist feminism” gained prominence. This particular brand of feminism is well represented by Dolores Hayes in the *Grand Domestic Revolution*.² Materialist feminism took particular aim at the roles and relationships in the home.³ But the nuclear family was far from the only target of feminism. According to Britannica every area of western life has been influenced by feminism. “More generally, and especially in the West, feminism had influenced every aspect of contemporary life, communication, and debate, from the heightened concern over sexist language to the rise of academic fields such as women’s studies and ecofeminism. Sports, divorce laws, sexual mores, organized religion—all had been affected, in many parts of the world, by feminism.”⁴

What men and women had for generations understood as an effective household model—husband as wage earner and head of household, wife as homemaker—was now deemed by culture as morally wrong. Men across the western world felt unseated. Who were they if not protectors and providers? The result of the feminist redefinition of gender roles has been multi-faceted, but one thing is certain, men have lost their sense of purpose and have begun to disengage from life. That disengagement may not have caused the birth of the internet world, but it has paralleled its creation and growth. Men in particular have used technology as a retreat from dealing with the stress of life as it is. Avoidant Personality Disorder, often a product of too much time in the digital world, is a problem many must overcome to even engage in the basic relationships

² Dolores Hayes, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981).

³ More than creating a new brand of feminism, Hayes book is a reflection of the movement of feminist thought in its time. Feminism of this era viewed the “housewife” role in the terms of uncompensated labor, and thus an active subjugation of women in general.

⁴ Laura Brunell, “Feminism,” Britannica, August 27, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism>.

required for work and education.⁵

This chapter will open with a brief history of the significant factors in men's ministry in the last 30 years. Next, the chapter will prove its thesis through an analysis of four main categories of Christian men's literature. The thesis is that while there is much good literature to help men draw close to God, more could be written calling men to simply love one another as a means to draw close to God. The four sections are: "Isolation" an exploration of the effect of the internet on that part of man that engages with his Creator; "Discipline" an exploration of the books encouraging Christian men to draw close to God through a combination of willpower and information; "Mentoring" an exploration of books encouraging men to draw closer to Jesus through mentoring relationships; and "Narrative Spirituality" an exploration of books that encouraged men to draw close to God through persuading them to see themselves in the biblical narrative of history.

A Brief History

Promise Keepers held tremendous sway throughout the 1990s, but ran in to some financial issues at the end of that decade and began to fade in influence. An inauspicious little book took the reins of male Christianity in 2001. *Wild at Heart* by John Eldredge presented a masculine narrative that resonated with millions, even making the *New York Times* bestseller list.⁶ This is no small feat for a Christian book, especially

⁵Omer Faruk Akca, "Social Media Use and Personality Disorders," *Anatolian Journal of Psychiatry* 21, no. x, (January 2019), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335975046_Social_media_use_and_personality_disorders.

⁶ John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001).

one directed at the hard to hit niche of disillusioned Christian men.

Wild at Heart tells a new story for men, one that repaints a vision of masculinity in a world rushing to embrace feminism. The fundamental premise of *Wild at Heart* is that every man has a wound that Jesus wants to heal. The healing of that wound will allow him to fully embrace the battle God has for him to fight, the beauty God wants him to rescue, and the adventure God designed for his life. The ministry of John Eldredge (originally “Ransomed Heart” recently renamed “Wild at Heart”) has continued to exert significant influence in literature for Christian men, but there are several other categories, lesser known but helpful, that have had significant impact on men’s ministry.

Within this milieu, masculinity has lost. Leonard Sax in his book, *Boys Adrift*, overviews how the different elements of culture are negatively impacting boys.

What’s troubling about so many of the boys I see in my practice, or the boys I hear about from parents and teachers, is that they don’t have much passion for any real-world activity...The boys I am talking about don’t disdain school because they have other real-world activities they care about more. They disdain school because they disdain everything.⁷

Sax, from a secular perspective, details how young men drop out of high school at higher rates than girls, apply to college at lower rates than girls, drop out of college at higher rates than girls, and even are less employed/employable than girls. Though his book was written in 2006, the trends he noted have only increased.⁸

In light of the shift of culture, movements like Promise Keepers and Wild at Heart are not surprising. What is surprising is that there are not more books and programs

⁷ Leonard Sax, *Boys Adrift* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 7.

⁸ Allie Bidwell, “Women More Likely to Graduate College But Still Earn Less Than Men,” *U.S. News and World Report*, October 31, 2014, <https://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2014/10/31/women-more-likely-to-graduate-college-but-still-earn-less-than-men>.

for Christian men—means to affirm a biblical model of masculinity and its relationship to the world.

Isolation

Portland, Oregon is a study in contrast. It is arguably one of the most progressive cities in America, a place where the battle against the “patriarchy” has been most successful. And yet Portland, Oregon has the dehumanizing claim to fame as having most strip clubs per capita in the country.⁹ Culture has been defining masculinity and femininity in contrast to the Bible, and the result has been disastrous for all involved.

The rise of feminism, for whatever good or ill it ultimately accomplished, undoubtedly left men wondering about their role, value, and purpose. That wondering has resulted in an abdication not just of the patriarchy the feminists decried, but also of the value they had to offer the world. Interminable puerility is a valid option for many young men, so much so that films like *Failure to Launch* are built around the cultural motif of interminable puerility. The film is built on the premise of frustrated parents trying to get their son to grow up and move out.¹⁰

In the pain of wondering about their value or lack thereof, a new element entered the life of masculinity, one that provided escape from the pressure to be someone or accomplish something. The internet was born 30 years ago on August 6, 1991. Here was a virtual world with everything men needed and none of the weight of responsibility. Social media was born, and with it, virtual friends that one can “like” or “unlike” with a

⁹ Caryn Brooks, “Portland, 10 things to do,” *Time*, accessed March 16, 2020, http://content.time.com/time/travel/cityguide/article/0,31489,1975826_1975753_1975585,00.html.

¹⁰ *Failure to Launch* premiered in 2006, and remained the top box office seller for two weeks.

click of a button. Online gaming was born, an endless opportunity to experience a sense of accomplishment without the fear of failure—simply hit the restart button; and online gaming has real people involved—just physically removed by hundreds or thousands of miles. Of course, intimacy is also offered without the need to offer support or love through an endless supply of pornography. Here, at last, men could find something that resembled the purpose, intimacy, and significance life was supposed to hold, or at least numb them to the painful reality of a world where they didn't belong.

Nicholas Carr writes about the devastating impact of the virtual world in *The Shallows*.¹¹ The book is laid out so that it communicates its thesis even as it communicates—that is to say that Carr forces the reader to slow down as the thesis of the book is slowly, even coyly, revealed through an account of how modes of thinking have developed in accordance with the changes in the tools that communicate thought throughout history.¹² From the development of early symbols, to alphabets, to the printing press and books made broadly available, to the electronic revolution of radio, TV, and movies, to the internet—Carr charts all of it as progression in ways of thinking. Carr inserts this chilling line in his chart of history, “We become neurologically what we think.”¹³ While this plasticity in the brain may seem to be a benefit, it comes with the contrasting reality, once the brain has been changed in a certain way, “Routine activities are carried out ever more quickly and efficiently, while unused circuits are pruned

¹¹ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc, 2011).

¹² Carr holds his thesis back until the last page of the book.

¹³ Carr, *The Shallows*, 33.

away.”¹⁴ The brain would develop new patterns and lose old ones.

The plasticity of the brain has implications for how addictions are developed and quantified. It has even been suggested that general screen time, or internet use, can produce addiction like changes in a person.¹⁵ Particularly troubling is how social media use in particular (Facebook, YouTube) is affecting the brain in ways that short-circuit the will. Mark Griffiths writes, “there is clearly emerging evidence that a minority of social network users experience addiction-like symptoms as a consequence of their excessive use.”¹⁶

Addiction is not the only negative pattern emerging from screen time. Depression has been found to correlate with screen time. In a 2017 article, Madhav, Serchand, and Serchan, found a direct correlation. “Results showed that moderate or severe depression level was associated with higher time spent on TV watching and use of computer (> 6 h/day). TV watching and computer use can predict the depression level among adults.”¹⁷

When sexual stimulation is combined with the addictive/depressive components of time in the virtual world, the plasticity of the brain is directly affected. Donald Hilton argues, “This addictive effect may be amplified by the accelerated novelty

¹⁴ Carr, 34.

¹⁵ Mark Griffiths, “A ‘components’ model of addiction within a biopsychosocial framework,” *Journal of Substance Use* 10, no. 4 (August 2005): 191-97, <https://addictionpsychologist.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/griffiths-2005-addiction-components.pdf>.

¹⁶ Mark Griffiths, “Social Networking Addiction: Emerging Themes and Issues,” *Addiction Research & Therapy* 4, no. 5 (2013): 1-2, http://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/25994/1/221567_PubSub2932_-Griffiths.pdf.

¹⁷ K.C. Madhav, Shardulendra Prasad Sherchand, and Samendra Sherchan, “Association between screen time and depression among US adults,” *Elsevier Preventive Medicine Reports* 8, (2017): 67-71, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5574844/>.

and the ‘supranormal stimulus’ (a phrase coined by Nikolaas Tinbergen) factor afforded by Internet pornography.”¹⁸ The implications of a virtual world are still being discovered, as this world, and this means of communication did not exist even thirty years ago.

Suffice it to say, the patterns observed at this point are not good. Carr writes, “The distractions in our lives have been proliferating for a long time, but never has there been a medium that, like the Net, has been programmed to so widely scatter our attention and to do it so insistently.”¹⁹ Carr argues that the web is funded through ads—little pieces of information that pop up, rotate, and bounce onto our screen every few seconds. The ads are only successful if they generate a response from the viewer, a click. Fundamentally, the internet depends on and rewards distraction—the inability to focus or think deeply. The internet, the solace for boys and men who are lost in the wandering, has been surreptitiously cutting the connection between body and soul. The stillness the psalmist practiced when he wrote, “I have stilled and quieted my soul” (Psalm 131:2) is not possible for the mind entrenched in an online world. And that separation is not a small thing or easily done—“...The net may well be the single most powerful mind-altering technology that has ever come into general use.”²⁰ And the use of it is robbing humanity of the ability to engage with God—“Our ability to engage in ‘meditative thinking’...might become a victim of headlong progress.”²¹

¹⁸ Donald L. Hilton, Jr., “Pornography addiction—a supranormal stimulus considered in the context of neuroplasticity,” *Socioaffective Neuroscience & Psychology*, published July 19, 2013, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3960020/>.

¹⁹ Carr, *The Shallows*, 113.

²⁰ Carr, *The Shallows*, 116.

²¹ Carr, 222.

The evil triumvirate, the world, the flesh and the devil, have a new weapon—one that distances people from their soul and their soul’s longing for God in such devastating fashion that to commune with God is not even possible. The parts of us that could be still, concentrate, and commune with God are under assault.

Types of Spiritual Growth Models

What follows is an overview of the material produced for the spiritual growth of men since 1990. The books mentioned are so because of their popularity and depth. These are good books, well worth the investment of buying and reading. They have helped millions of men find love, life, and purpose in their walk with God. Each book will be placed in a category that best describes it, with a brief description of what it has added to the body of work on men’s spiritual growth. It will also be pointed out that there remains some space to pursue spiritual growth among men from the standpoint of love.

The books covered below are in the top one hundred books on Amazon’s “Christian Men’s Issues.” In 2017, Amazon, who owns half of all print sales and more than 90 percent of digital books sales, ceased to make its publishing numbers public.²² Given Amazon’s influence over the book publishing market, when it ceased to publicize its publication numbers, it re-oriented both the kind of information available in the entire industry as well as the format of the information available. For this reason, the books mentioned below are selected from Amazon’s top one hundred “Christian Men’s Issues” list. Several of the books referred to were published before Amazon was created, not to

²² Mike Shatzkin, “A Changing Book Business: It All Seems To Be Flowing Downhill To Amazon,” The Ideal Logical Company (January 22, 2018). <https://www.idealog.com/blog/changing-book-business-seems-flowing-downhill-amazon/>.

mention established itself as a leading retailer.²³ This speaks to the power and significance these books have had across decades within Christianity.

Disciplines

Spiritual disciplines have been advocated by leaders in the church for centuries. Donald Whitney's book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, gives a comprehensive list of the classic spiritual disciplines for believers to practice in pursuit of their walk with God.²⁴ Spiritual disciplines are not gender specific; for example, there is nothing inherently masculine about fasting. Any attempt to grow in one's relationship will involve the practice of spiritual disciplines, whether by that name or another.²⁵

Disciplines as a category are habitual practices that foster spiritual growth. Bible reading is one of the most universally advocated spiritual disciplines, because reading the Bible is essential if one desires to know God, and recognize His movements in the world. As it relates to the topic of this project, the operative principle of spiritual disciplines—regular daily practices that foster spiritual growth—will be the defining boundary that determines what falls into the category of disciplines.

The essence of books in this category is an encouragement to embrace a

²³ The only other book retailer that in any way competes with Amazon is Barnes & Noble. Barnes & Noble does not publish a best-sellers list in the category of Christian men's issues. While Barnes & Noble offers a best-seller search in some categories of Christianity, men's issues is not one of those categories.

²⁴ Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014).

²⁵ Donald Whitney includes Bible reading, prayer, worship, evangelism, serving, stewardship, fasting, silence and solitude, journaling, and learning topics in *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Though some list different practices for spiritual disciplines, Whitney's is a good list of the traditional practices in spiritual disciplines. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), is another pivotal book on the spiritual disciplines.

masculine sense of discipline that overcomes the brokenness in the world and in yourself by a combination of willpower and biblically based instruction. They are targeted to men who do not know what the Bible says, but desire to live a godly life against the flow of culture. Books in this genre were born out of the Promise Keepers era. The books in this category fail to adequately utilize relationships of love as a means of spiritual growth.

Kent Hughes jumps into the world of Christian male literature with his book *Disciplines of a Godly Man*. Published in 1991, just a year after Promise Keepers got started, Hughes introduces his book with lines such as, “Therefore, as children of grace, our spiritual discipline is everything—everything! I repeat...discipline is everything!”²⁶ Hughes’ aim is godly living. One must not confuse this goal with the goal of intimacy with God—there is a distinction between a life filled with the spiritual disciplines and a life spent enjoying intimacy with God. The Pharisees were famously disciplined, but they did not enjoy intimacy with God (Luke 11:42). Certainly Hughes has intimacy with God as an indirect goal, but his main concern is to reveal and encourage a modern-day version of the godly disciplined life. While a life filled with spiritual disciplines may not lead to intimacy with God, a life filled with the intimacy of God will be a life filled with spiritual disciplines.

Hughes’ book covers sixteen personal disciplines. Some of these are predictable, like prayer, but others are new, for example marriage, fatherhood, and friendship. What is quickly clear is that Hughes means something vastly different from spiritual disciplines when he uses the term “discipline.” While discipline is the focus of

²⁶ Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man* (Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 1991), 13. This book is number fifty-seven on Amazon’s best seller list under Christian Men’s Issues.

the book, Hughes clearly aims at practical lifestyle practices more than the historic spiritual disciplines. The chapter on fatherhood, for instance, encourages fathers not to show favoritism.²⁷ While certainly good advice, the avoidance of favoritism is not a spiritual discipline—it is just good practical advice for dads.

In his chapter on devotion, Hughes combines the historic disciplines of reading the Bible, memorization, and adoration. These topics do resemble the themes of spiritual disciplines as they are classically understood, but they are approached as ways of living rather indistinct from being a good father (or friend or husband). The mode of life change in Hughes's book is simply knowledge plus will. He presents the right decisions to be made in a variety of life settings and tells the reader to do them.

There are several important books with distinct content that work according to the same formula as Hughes'. Steve Farrar's pivotal book *Point Man* published in 1990 imparts knowledge on how fathers should lead a family and encourages them to act accordingly.²⁸ Farrar encourages Bible reading and a healthy prayer life as well as practical steps to leading a family well.

Another standout of this genre is *The Man in the Mirror* by Patrick Morley.²⁹ Morley gives an in-depth analysis of the problems men face as well as categories of response to those problems—ranging from worldly to godly. This is a unique presentation of knowledge and a powerful way of encouraging right action in response to

²⁷ Hughes, 50.

²⁸ Steve Farrar, *Point Man* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2003).

²⁹ Patrick Morley, *The Man in the Mirror* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014). This book is number fifty-one on Amazon's best seller list under Christian Men's Issues. Other books by Morley, less read, but equally weighty are *Pastoring Men* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), and *The Man's Guide to Spiritual Discipline* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007).

it. The book is following the same formula for life-change—knowledge plus will results in closeness to God.

The focus of Morley’s book is to encourage men to divorce their pre-salvation way of living and adopt new ways of life. The new patterns of life involve relationships, so Morley advocates men’s ministry settings and accountability. In the setting of male friendship, men gain the strength to live counter-culturally. Morley’s book is designed specifically for group use, including discussion questions following each chapter. This relational approach is key to achieving the goal of his book. However, Morley’s book shows its age. It was first published in 1989 when men were taking advantage of an economic system that always seemed to pay off. Working harder always resulted in a higher standard of living, and that higher standard of living was motivational for men. Young men are no longer outperforming their fathers economically.³⁰

Though little known, *The God Who Draws Near* has a chapter devoted to friendship as a means of grace.³¹ There Haykin charts friendship through biblical references in direct support of friendship, as well as offers narratives built around the topic of friendship. Haykins’ unique contribution to the topic of friendship is a recounting of several close friendships the Reformers and those who followed them enjoyed. Through this accounting friendship is presented as mutually beneficial in the pursuit of knowing Jesus.

³⁰ Jeff Stein, “Not doing better than their fathers’: Men’s earnings have fallen since the 1970s, Census Bureau says,” *Washington Post*, September 14, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2018/09/14/not-doing-better-than-their-fathers-mens-earnings-have-fallen-since-s-census-says/>.

³¹ Michael Haykin, *The God Who Draws Near* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press USA, 2007).

Mentoring

Mentoring is a practical, biblical method of drawing people close to Jesus, one that models the discipleship demonstrated throughout the New Testament. This method of drawing people close to Jesus is anything but new, and it has proven successful over two millennia. Books on mentoring span both secular and Christian audiences, as this method of changing lives clearly and genuinely works. Even the leadership titan of the business world, John Maxwell, advocates mentoring in his short book *Mentoring 101*.³²

Within the Christian context, any mentoring assessment would be incomplete without reference to Greg Ogden's pivotal book *Transforming Discipleship* published in 2003, and revised for release again in 2016. Though this book is not directly addressed to men (and thus isn't on Amazon's Christian Men's Issues top 100 list), it has been used by church leaders across the country as a paradigm for discipleship with great success.³³

Ogden's 2019 book, *Discipleship Essentials*, builds on the same principles, but applies them more broadly than the mentoring relationship.³⁴ Ogden lists three elements necessary for transforming discipleship: relational investment, multiplication, and transformative process. Ogden's approach to relationships is most aligned with the thesis of this paper of all authors reviewed.

Ogden identifies seven causes of failure in the attempt to make disciples which amount to a poor view of the church, the believer, and method.³⁵ He concludes his

³² John Maxwell, *Mentoring 101* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2008).

³³ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2016).

³⁴ Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2018). This book, built on the same principles as *Transforming Discipleship* is number eleven on Amazon's Christian Church Growth best seller list.

³⁵ Passive ministers, casual Christian life, private discipleship, conformed culture, optional

explanation of why the church is failing in its attempt with this line, “The primary way we grow people into self-initiating, reproducing, fully devoted followers of Jesus is by being engaged in highly accountable, relational, multiplying discipleship units of three or four.”³⁶ He defines discipling as, “an intentional relationship in which we walk alongside other disciples in order to encourage, equip and challenge one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ. This includes equipping the disciple to teach others as well.”³⁷ The goal of maturity in Christ is certainly worthy and biblical, however, love is only a passing mention by which things should be done, it is not a goal of Ogden’s discipleship process, nor is it a means.

The most helpful of Ogden’s critiques focuses on the programmatic approach most churches use in the context of discipleship. Concerning the “programs as discipleship” method of drawing people closer to Jesus, he writes, “Though...programs can contribute to discipleship development, they miss the central ingredient in discipleship....Unless people receive personal attention...disciples will not be formed.”³⁸ Intimate relationships are clearly essential to all discipleship attempts for Ogden, but relationships cannot be void of content or purpose.

Ogden further takes issue with several of the masculine books on discipleship covered in this paper when he writes, “Information does not lead to transformation.”³⁹

church, illiterate Bible understanding, and inactive witness. Ogden, 24.

³⁶ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 56.

³⁷ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 124.

³⁸ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 124.

³⁹ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 46.

Discipleship must require relational investment for it to even qualify—a class that downloads information may draw a few stellar students closer to Jesus, but most will be unmoved. This illustrates another principle of Ogden’s: discipleship happens in small groups, ideally three people.⁴⁰ In that context there is an opportunity for real intimacy and growth that a larger group setting would not allow. The heart of Ogden’s method is found in chapters 6-8, but the bedrock is chapter 6, “Life Investment.”⁴¹ Two factors make his formula: covenantal relationships plus time results in disciples.⁴² Covenantal relationships, then, are the variable ingredient that churches have missed.⁴³ These relationships have intimacy, mutual responsibility, unique growth challenges, and accountable life change. All of Ogden’s book is couched in the context of relationship—a mentor inviting mentees into a relationship.

While Ogden brings a great deal to the discussion of what men need to grow closer to Jesus, he has only one paragraph on love.⁴⁴ And even at that, the paragraph is an impotent encouragement for a leader to do everything in love, otherwise the people being disciplined will not trust the leader. Much of the counsel in Ogden’s work could be viewed as practical ways to express love, however, loving people seems like a checked box tangential to the main pursuit of maturity in Christ. Like all the materials reviewed thus

⁴⁰ Ogden argues that groups of three create natural participation, relational engagement, dynamic interchange, wisdom in numbers, and multiplication as reasons why triads work really well. Ogden, 139-40.

⁴¹ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 113.

⁴² Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 117.

⁴³ Ogden says of covenantal relationships, “The parties commit themselves to mutually agreed standards that give shape to the relationship.” Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 124.

⁴⁴ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 125.

far, love could be (and the authors would certainly say *should* be) a significant part of Ogden’s process. What Ogden does not specifically advocate is a relationship where the leader loves those he leads—and every step in the process is a by-product of that love. Still, the relational approach to life change is certainly powerful.

Narrative/Spiritual

The essence of books in this category is an encouragement to see one’s life in light of the divine narrative. The divine narrative is another term for worldview. The formula of this genre is that a biblical narrative perspective on the world will encourage men to draw close to Jesus. When a man sees himself in light of the divine narrative (who he was created to be, the paradise Eden home he was created for, the evil that removed him from his home and his role in continuing to battle that evil), his new perspective on the world will grant him not only victory in the battles he fights, but that victory will be a consequence of his newfound trust and intimacy with God. On the Wild at Heart website there is a prominent tab with multiple resources linked to it titled, “The Larger Story.” Books by John Eldredge repaint experience of the world in the hues of the Biblical narrative. The chapters in *The Sacred Romance* all begin with a few lines of a parable about a sea lion—the parable is a retelling of man’s experience of life in a broken world.⁴⁵ Despite the fact that this genre is owned by the Wild at Heart ministry, it is worth its own mention not only because it has become so popular, but also because it has spawned more authors, conferences and ministries than those of Eldredge himself. There

⁴⁵ John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997).

is an “allies’ network” with over 1,100 associated ministries on the Wild at Heart website.

Though there are numerous books and authors, *Wild at Heart* is the pivotal work of this genre.⁴⁶ The book is an explanation of a worldview built on three principles: every man has a battle to fight, beauty to fight for, and an adventure to live. Eldredge begins his presentation of the worldview by reminding his readers that Adam, their father, was not made in the Garden of Eden, but was made in the untamed regions outside the Garden and placed in the Garden by God. Man, then, has the wildness in his heart—it is part of his story. This wildness is necessary to be victorious in the pitched battle against evil that every man must fight, to win the captivating beauty, and to sustain the adventurous life.

What *Wild at Heart* provided that was missed in previous books was an answer to the value question. Men were valuable because they had a battle to fight—and that was bigger than being the sole wage earner. Men were valuable because they had a beauty to fight for—and it didn’t matter if she was at home or at work. Men were valuable because they had to lead themselves and their loved ones on an adventure that was unique to them—and that was the context that brought meaning to all the little cumbersome details of life. Of all the books here covered, this one has sold more copies, in some circumstances, many times more.

Though the beauty is certainly to be loved, and the subject of the book is the

⁴⁶ John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2001). This book is number four on Amazon’s best seller list under Christian Men’s Issues.

recipient and responder to the love of God, there is not much written in the book about being in a community of love. It would be a mistake to say that the narrative spiritual approach does not include community or love, there certainly is an encouragement to find a team of men who have adopted the same worldview and to journey with them. Certainly in this category of ministry a soldiers comradeship is encouraged through the resources and programs which have been launched tangentially since the book was published. But even here, love of another is not pursued as a means of growing closer to Jesus.

One of the most significant works for the purposes of this paper is *Get Your Life Back*.⁴⁷ In this book Eldredge addresses the topic raised by Carr in *The Shallows*. Eldredge uses the illustration of a boot in the Colorado winter that has been left in the front yard. That boot will fill with snow and ice and freeze. There will be no way to put the boot on until it has thawed out. In much the same way, people have been so overwhelmed with internet noise and distraction that there is no place for communion with God.

In *Get Your Life Back*, Eldredge is still moving in the streams of the narrative spiritual realm, but he introduces spiritual disciplines as well. Most notably, he encourages one-minute pauses. The pause is a moment to stop and give all one's cares to God. He even provides a pause app, so people can listen to a prayer of submitting their cares and themselves to God for one minute.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ John Eldredge, *Get your Life Back* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2020).

⁴⁸ The pause app includes 1, 3, 5, and 10 minute pauses.

The practices advocated in *Get Your Life Back* are distinct from the typical list of spiritual disciplines. Eldredge makes a compelling argument that engagement in beauty is a spiritual discipline—a means of receiving God’s love. Engaging in beauty looks like going outside and enjoying nature; taking time to see and appreciate natural beauty. And yet, he also advocates for benevolent detachment as a means of giving the soul space to breathe. Right alongside “benevolent detachment” is “simple unplugging” where the reader is encouraged to embrace restrictions on the use of their phone. All of the practices advocated in the book (and it is advocating practices, not telling a story as his other books did) are spiritual disciplines for the technological age. The distinction these disciplines have from previous lists is that they are focused on freeing one from the distractions of technology in order to embrace communion with God. Though *Get Your Life Back* is an answer to the stranglehold technology has placed on the soul, it does not deal with love as a means of spiritual growth.

The narrative spiritual genre provided a great answer to the question of value. Men were able to see themselves in a story that made sense of their world, as well as gave them purpose and value. They did matter, and so did their life and choices. Though there are many opportunities to experience love through the Wild at Heart ministry such as bootcamps, the literature itself is not inherently relational. It is individual in focus—reframe your life in terms of the biblical narrative. Though there is much to gain from this genre, the missing ingredient is a straightforward encouragement to love. Though most if not all books will encourage men to love, few if any view growth in love as means for walking closer to Jesus.

Conclusion

Christian men have been on a journey of response to culture. As culture, information, and entertainment have radically changed, so have men, even at the level of physical characteristics of the brain. The church, as God's tool to change the world, has adapted to this changing canvas of culture with tools of her own—books written from different standpoints but all designed to pull men out of the current of culture, and into intimacy with God. As culture continues to shift, a largely untapped but ancient stream of spiritual maturity is increasingly essential for men—that stream is relationships of love as a channel to intimacy with God. The attempt of this paper was to outline a path forward in this category.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT DESCRIPTION FOR NAG'S HEAD CHURCH MEN'S SPIRITUAL GROWTH PROGRAM

My original goal was to run a program with six young men from Nags Head Church in Nags Head, North Carolina. I conducted the program with five men aged 24 to 45 instead. These men were involved by invitation. One young man declined the invitation. The men involved were chosen because they had given evidence of spiritual growth and hunger and thus were less likely to drop out of the program. Significant spiritual maturity was not a requirement for those invited to the program, but simply sincere desire to take the next step toward spiritual maturity.

As the work for chapter 3 was wrapping up, I began researching the right men to invite to the program. In addition to seeking participants, I began to work intensely on the curriculum. By the first session I had rough drafts of the first three chapters. I continued to stay about a chapter ahead in the writing of the curriculum, getting input and making edits to the material before presenting to the men. I recorded myself speaking in some of the sessions where I felt the material wasn't quite making the point I wanted. I used that recording to rewrite the material, resulting in curriculum the represented in the Appendix 5.

We met at a participant's home Friday morning at 7:00 am. The host cooked breakfast and made coffee for all the participants. Each meeting opened with prayer and then I asked each participant how they were doing. The answer to that question was to be between two and five minutes in length and according to the Life-Death Spectrum.

The Life-Death Spectrum tool is designed to help participants arrive at a practical

answer to the question of whether or not they had been abiding in Jesus during the week. As such, the answer to “How are you doing?” was not a recounting of good or bad events, but rather whether or not the participants had enjoyed the life of Jesus—through both the hard and the pleasant times.

After each one had given an account of how they were doing, we prayed for each other, each man praying for the man to his left. After prayer, I read through a manuscript. The manuscripts were part evaluation of the current issues facing men with a focus on screen distraction, and part exegetical analysis of selected passages from 1 John. Integrated into each manuscript were discussion questions, at which the group would pause to discuss the information just covered. Each participant was given a manuscript of the information covered that morning at the start of the session that they were to take home for further thought and reflection throughout the week if desired.

At the close of each session there were practices to be completed the following week. Some of these practices were to endure through the end of the program, and others ended by the next session. The goal of the practices was to both enable and require expressions of love, one for another, in the course of the program. At the first meeting, the men completed the pre-surveys. At the last meeting, they completed the post surveys. The surveys took about twenty minutes to complete.

The curriculum shown in summary form below is a product of both an intensive development process as a student at Southern Seminary, and an extended experience in men’s ministry across four churches that has spanned the United States, from Pennsylvania to California. There were significant factors that drove the selection of topics covered in the chapters of the curriculum.

The first and most significant factor was the text of 1 John. The teaching of the Apostle John on the love between believers is both comprehensive and inspired. Though many places in the Bible speak to the responsibilities of God's people to one another, the letter of 1 John is unique in that it combines relational growth between believers as a means of spiritual growth and a metric of spiritual growth.

The second factor driving the chapter selection was the Life Death Spectrum tool. As that tool was designed to tangibly demonstrate the experience or lack thereof of intimacy with God through practical dichotomies (e.g., isolation/love, disengaged/engaged, distracted/present), chapters focused on moving participants from the experience of death to the experience of life.

The first chapter was addressed anxiety, fear, powerlessness. The second chapter introduced a screen time fast which was designed to address isolation, distraction, disengagement, and apathy. The third chapter addressed the reception and expression of love through an honest assessment of how well the participants currently expressed and received love. The fourth chapter addressed defensiveness, isolation, and powerlessness. Chapter five addressed dishonesty, isolation, and fear through the content and the practice of writing and sharing their love story. Chapters six and seven addressed distance, disengagement, defensiveness, numbness and isolation. Chapter eight addressed dishonesty, distance, disengagement, and distraction.

Several people advised on the content of the chapters. The first was a ministry professional with 8 years' experience as a youth pastor. As the transition out of adolescence has slid back, effective youth ministry has extended.¹ With the rise of social media, the challenges young people face are distinct from the challenges of older generations. The struggles of men

¹ Lucy Wallis, "Is 25 The New Cut-Off Point for Adulthood?" BBC News, September 23, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24173194>.

under thirty look like balancing their gaming, social life, and work. These patterns are being established in pubescence, giving one practiced in youth ministry a unique perspective on the interaction between screen time and spiritual growth.²

Another significant contributor was a person who has written spiritual growth curriculum for young women, run small group women's discipleship programs, and has a master's in biblical studies. The consultation with someone skilled in ministry to young women was invaluable as an inside perspective on what young women have to say about the men they are interested in, dating, or married to. Men tend to present an image of masculinity to other men that may not be an accurate representation of who they are in their other relationships. Invaluable insights were added to the curriculum based on the counsel of this advisor.³

The love story was an adaptation from a life mapping exercise in a men's program developed by Harvest Community Fellowship in Quakertown, PA.⁴ The adaptations made for this program were designed to shorten the exercise by eliminating the presentation aspect, and narrowing its focus to the experiences of love.

The Life Death Spectrum tool originally grew out of a list of generic men's accountability questions.⁵ While generic accountability questions are helpful from a standpoint of encouraging good behavior, the Life Death Spectrum tool was designed to do something distinct from behavior modification. It was designed to highlight, for the one answering the

² Deyan Georgiev, "How Much Time Do People Spend on Social Media?" *Review 42*, July 4, 2021. <https://review42.com/resources/how-much-time-do-people-spend-on-social-media/>.

³ This advisor was not involved in any capacity with the spouses or girlfriends of the participants.

⁴ Harvest was a nondenominational church that followed the attractional model. It went defunct in 2009.

⁵ Wayne Stiles, "10 Accountability Questions to Grow Your Christian Life," September 29, 2014. <https://waynestiles.com/10-accountability-questions-to-grow-your-christian-life/>.

questions and the rest of the group, both the reality of whether or not one had walked with Jesus, and the isolating, “deathlike” experience of not walking with Jesus. The author had solidified this tool, in the form represented here, by the fall of 2018. However, the tool itself had been created and refined through practical use over a period of almost five years in small men’s discipleship groups.

The survey was created by the author for this program. There are numerous spiritual growth surveys, suited for all ranges of maturity, age and sex. However, given the limitations of this program, finding a survey appropriate to it proved difficult.⁶ The survey was created using the guidelines established by Southern Baptist Theological Seminary to specifically measure relational growth and through that, spiritual growth.

Summary of Each Lesson

What follows is a summary of the goal, content, and application of each week’s material.

Week 1

The goal of week one was to redefine the feeling and experience of freedom, as well as identify the true threat to real freedom. Real freedom doesn’t feel like superficial lightness and joy, it is often uncomfortable, painful, anxious, and unsettling. The threat to real freedom is the flesh, which I termed the inner tyrant. This is the part of every believer that demands to be

⁶ The major limitation that eliminated using previously created surveys is directly tied to the thesis of this project—by growing in loving relationship with other believers, we grow in our love for God. The survey then had to ask questions related to the growth of relationships within the group as well as growth in the relationship with God. The other limitations were that the survey was gender specific, and defined relationships by the parameters of 1 John.

satiated, be it through lust, gluttony, drunkenness, or whatever manifestation of sin one is drawn to. Love requires freedom from the inner tyrant; without that freedom love is lost.

The text of this lesson was focused on Jesus' first sermon recorded in Luke 4:18, as well as Romans 7:14-15 and John 8:34-35. Many other passages were referenced, but these were primary.

The practices for week one were to have each participant list strongholds of their inner tyrant as well as list two areas that drew out their defensiveness. This was done in the meeting. During the week, the assignment was to memorize Luke 4:18-19 and fast for the day prior to our meeting. The point of the fast was to help identify the inner tyrant.

Week 2

The goal of week two was to have the men realize both the damage of screen time and the impact it is having on their life and their ability to love. The average age of the men in the program was thirty-three, and all participants were heavily engaged in screen time at the start of the program. Screen time absorption competes with the space needed to love.

The content of week two was drawn from Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows*, as well as several journal articles. Content was chosen that demonstrated the impact screens were having on the mind, emotions, and will, including creating addictions, generating depression, and removing the ability to think deeply. Pornography was discussed as an addictive behavior, but also as an on-ramp for the discussion of what is being escaped from/medicated through screen addiction.

The effect of screen use was contrasted with the Bible's commands to be still before God, focusing on the idea that communion with God is impossible in hectic, frenetic thoughts of a screen-succored mind. In contrast to the effect of the screens Psalm 131 was used to demonstrate how approaching God required stillness and a disciplined mind cleared of

distractions.

The practices for week two were to have each person commit to a total screen time fast, with the exception of one night for online gaming. This fast included all internet browsing, social media, television shows, and movies. As part of this fast, cell-phones were to be put on airplane mode by 8:00 p.m. and were not to be taken off airplane mode until one had been awake for thirty minutes. In addition to the screen fast, the participants were to memorize Psalm 131.

Week 3

The goal of week three was to have the men understand that love is a result of abiding with God, and to have them create space in their lives to abide in the love of God. Without abiding in God, one cannot love, while the one who abides in God will demonstrate that by loving other believers.

The content for week three was based on an in-depth study of 1 John 4:7-8. Discussion questions in this session bridged the gap from the study of the text to the experience of love in the participants' lives.

The practices for week three began with asking each man which of the screen fast practices they would commit to continue through the remainder of the program. In addition, each person was asked to spend fifteen minutes in stillness before using their phone in the morning. Participants were also asked to download a pause or meditation app and do at least one pause during each day. Men were asked to journal each day, answering three questions: What am I doing today? How am I doing today? What am I thinking about my relationship with God today? They were asked to memorize 1 John 4:7-8, as well as to ask several people close to them to use three words to describe them, or their relationship. Journaling, stillness, and the pause were practices that were assigned each week until the end of the program.

Week 4

The goal of week four was to have the men understand that the lack of love in their relationships was a demonstration of a lack of walking with God, while also defining that lack of love as sin. This goal was bolstered by having the men put love into practice for each other during the course of the week.

The content for week four was based on an in-depth study of 1 John 2:7-11. Discussion questions focused on making real-life applications and convictions based on the theology present in those verses.

The practices for week four included the continuation of journaling, screen time commitments, pauses, and fifteen minutes of stillness prior to using phones. In addition, each person was to express love in a distinct manner to each other person in the group. The act of love was to be specific to the one receiving it, and required thought, planning, and in some cases expense (e.g. some guys exchanged gifts, others did acts of service, like feeding people and washing feet, others invested their time in meaningful ways). Each person was assigned a day where the other members of the group would express love to him. The expressions of love were to be guided by the Holy Spirit.

Week 5

The goal of week five was to have the participants understand that though God's love for them never falters, neither does Satan's attempts to blind believers to the love God has for them. Having understood this reality, participants were to understand that love must be a lifestyle and worldview.

The content of week five was based on an in-depth analysis of 1 John 3:12-17. Discussion questions focused on drawing real life applications of both how God's love is

obscured from view, as well as how believers must boldly declare their love for God by generously loving those in their family of faith.

The practices for week five included the continuation of journaling, screen time commitments, pauses, and fifteen minutes of stillness prior to using phones. In addition, each man was asked to memorize 1 John 4:9-11 as well as write their story of love in a one-page format, due to the group in five days' time. Their story of love was to be a chronological account of how they had received love and how love was withheld from them when it was needed. When the stories were received, they were to be prayerfully read through by the other men.

The guidelines for writing the story of love were the following: one page, bullet point format, chronological order, listing the positive receptions of love, as well as the moments where love was missing.

Week 6

The goal of week six was to have the participants understand that they have a vital role in revealing the love of God to their believing family. As they love others, they remove the blinders from the one they are loving, revealing the love of God and filling up the beloved's experience of God's love.

The content of week five was based on an in-depth analysis of 1 John 4:9-12. Discussion questions focused on drawing real life applications based on personal experiences of love, or lack there-of, and God's love. In addition, discussion questions drove home the point that to love God's people is to love Him, and to love Him is to love His people.

The practices for week six included the continuation of journaling, screen time commitments, pauses, and fifteen minutes of stillness prior to using phones. In addition,

participants rewrote their story of love but from the perspective of God's love pursuing them, while Satan was attempting to blind them to God's love. The rewritten stories were to be shared in five days' time, and each man was to read and pray through each story and come prepared to speak into each one's story for week seven.

Week 7

The goal of week seven was for participants to practice loving each other through speaking truth in love, as well as to practice receiving love without defense. Both speaking truth in love and hearing truth in love is essential to real love.

The content of week seven lesson was a brief treatment of 1 John 3:18, focusing on the ideas of truthful and loving speech. The bulk of this week's lesson was spent giving time for each person to be spoken to personally by the others, and then be prayed for.

The practices for week seven included the continuation of journaling, screen time commitments, pauses, and fifteen minutes of stillness prior to using phones. In addition, the participants were asked to memorize 1 John 4:19-21.

Week 8

The goal of week eight was for the men to understand that God grants them the blessing of demonstrating His attributes (love), and the demonstration of those attributes are an acceptable metric to measure whether or not a believer is abiding in the love of God.

The content of chapter eight focused on 1 John 4:13-21 and 1 Peter 1:3-4, with discussion questions focused on the changing the metrics of spiritual growth from education, knowledge, or disciplines to practical demonstrations of love for one's family of believers.

In the place of the practices, three questions were asked of the group at the conclusion

of the chapter, advocated at the conclusion of chapter. These questions focused on preserving space to love, expressing love, and growing in love beyond the group.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

This chapter is an evaluation of the effectiveness of the program that was run at Nags Head Church as well as proposed improvements to it. With one notable exception, most of the participants answered the pre-survey by giving themselves high marks. Their responses to this first survey was no doubt influenced by several factors, one of which was that the men were all new acquaintances of mine (I had been at Nags Head Church less than a year when the program began). In addition to this, the men were new to each other. Some had known of each other for a few years, but none more than three years. When the participants filled out the pre and post survey they did so in sight of each other, and that may have influenced their answers as well.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of this project was to create a spiritual growth program through which a select group of men at Nags Head Church would develop the relationships, practices, and perspectives necessary to be present with God and others through vibrant relationship. This purpose was successfully achieved as demonstrated by result of the T-Test for dependent samples that was run at the conclusion of the program.

The program was particularly effective and necessary because of the isolation that the pandemic heightened among young men. The “worship from home” message many churches promoted was received as an implicit statement that the relational elements of the church were not important. And yet the church has never been primarily individualistic, and neither has

spiritual growth.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

The first goal was to assess the spiritual and relational health of a select group of six men in the Nags Head Church Men's Spiritual Growth Program. Though invitations went out to six men, only five were available for the program. The five who responded to the invitation took a spiritual health assessment survey which focused on the relational aspects of spiritual health.¹ Though only five participated in the program, all five took the assessment.

The second goal was to develop a curriculum for the Nags Head Church Men's Spiritual Growth Program that prioritized and utilized love for other believers, particularly the other participants in the group, as a means to grow spiritually to greater intimacy and obedience to God. This curriculum was written utilizing both current information on the challenges facing men, particularly through screens, as well as an in-depth study of four passages from the book of 1 John that emphasized the importance of loving one another as both a means and a metric of spiritual growth.

The third goal was to increase in love for God and others through participation in the Nags Head Church Men's Spiritual Growth Program. This goal was met as evidenced by the results of the T-Test for dependent samples result. In addition to the goals being met, the participants generated genuine friendship one for another. Though all five knew each other and interacted prior to the program, not all five were friends, and some of the group stated that they had few significant friendships at the start of the program, but had several by the end of it. An

¹ See appendix 1.

anecdote regarding the connections developed illustrates the friendships developed. An assignment for week two of the program was a screen time fast. The day the fast was instituted, a group text chat was developed with all the participants. In the course of the program more than 500 texts were exchanged in the group, and communication in this format continues today.

One of the challenges I discovered in reviewing the pre and post survey responses was that the curriculum set out to redefine much of the vocabulary (and ideas) utilized in the survey. For instance, question three in the survey asked the participants to rate their commitment level to their fellow believers. Deep commitment to fellow believers was redefined through the curriculum, so some actually rated themselves worse after the program on that question. It is my conviction that their commitment level to other believers actually grew, but the survey was unable to mark that change. There are several places in the survey where this issue appeared.

A second challenge in the surveys was that the men were far more guarded in the first meeting with one another than they were in the last meeting. In the last meeting, we had grown to be comfortable with brutal honesty about ourselves and each other that would have been unthinkable in the first session. This level of honesty was not reflected in the survey, but likely skewed the results negatively.

Although all the participants demonstrated positive change in the surveys, one participant demonstrated marked growth, rising eighty points in the survey results. This result is almost too fantastic to believe. This individual has restarted the program and is currently leading it with a second group of young men. It is my belief that God has called this man to pastoral ministry. He demonstrated a unique combination of hunger for God, contagious leadership, and total humility. His act of love (week 5) was to wash the feet of each other participants. The program was wonderfully blessed to have this man as a participant. I was unaware of his gifting

and hunger prior to the program.

There were several questions in the pre-survey that were answered almost universally lower. None of the participants, save one, indicated that they memorized Scripture on a weekly basis. All the participants spent time on their phones in the first fifteen waking minutes of the day. Another practice the survey measured was journaling. In the pre-survey, not one of the participants indicated that they had a regular journaling practice. While this changed for some throughout the program, journaling remained a struggle for most. There was variation in the answers, though most of the participants graded themselves on higher end of the spectrum on the other answers (Agree Somewhat or higher). The exception to this is the participant with the greatest change. He was brutally honest in his pre-survey, indicating few if any answers on the positive side of the spectrum. The noted exception being that he memorized Scripture.

Table 1: Test Results from Survey
T-Test Results

Test Results from 30-question survey with six-point Likert Scale			
180 points possible			
Participant	Before	After	Change
1	120	154	34
2	120	139	19
3	80	165	85
4	127	157	30
5	139	165	26
TOTAL	586	780	194
Mean	117.2	156	38.8
T-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means			
	<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>	
Mean	117.2	156	
Variance	492.7	114	
Observations	5	5	
Pearson Correlation	-0.191985173		
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0		
df	4		
t Stat	-3.284599075		
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.015184584		
t Critical one-tail	2.131846786		
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.030369168		
t Critical two-tail	2.776445105		

$t(5) = 3.285, p < .03$

The t-stat is larger than the t Critical two-tail, therefore the teaching intervention made a difference.

In addition to the T-test results, the participants were offered the opportunity to speak freely about their thoughts regarding the program. They used the phrases such as “life-changing” to describe their experience of the program. The group text stream continues with the guys regularly “checking in” with each other.

Strengths of the Project

The greatest strength of the project was in the relational assignments themselves. One of the assignments in week four was to demonstrate love to each member of the group. In the curriculum, we had been covering the biblical mandate to love one another, so with biblical authority each member was assigned a day on which they were to receive love from all the other men in the group. These expressions of love ranged from things like foot washing to gifts to time spent doing something a participant enjoyed.

There was awkwardness in the assignment as well as beauty. The men struggled with the concept of showing love—it took their time, money and creativity to complete, but they completed it, and affection for one another grew within the group. Another assignment was to list the positive and negative experiences of love. This assignment was aimed at getting the men to share their stories so that love could be in truth. Every story has brokenness and the brokenness was received with grace and healing. Intimacy and understanding were born out of that practice.

Given the demanding and at times intrusive nature of the assignments, the exegetical material in the curriculum was essential. Without the constant elevation of the responsibility to demonstrate love in 1 John, the assignments, and thus the growth of love would not have occurred. The group was blessed to have oppositional voices that required exacting justification of the truth claims and practices in the curriculum. Having well-justified material to place in

front of the participants allowed the push-back to dive into the full justification of the requirement for believers to love.

In the structure of the program, a host provided breakfast while the leader presented the material and guided the conversation. Having the conversations in a home, over a meal opened hearts to intimacy and relational development.

Weaknesses of the Project

The major weakness of the project was that it was too short. The relationships that began in the program have continued to grow after its completion, and even spurred participants to rerun the program with others who were not part of the group. Two of the participants are going to lead another group of young men using the curriculum, but without me in the group. However, greater relational depth could have been achieved if the program had continued to run within the parameters of a weekly meeting and weekly assignments.

A second weakness, somewhat related to the first, was the nature in which the participants shared their story of love. The program asked for the story to be written out in one page and shared electronically with the other men a few days before the group met in the sixth week. In the meeting, each man heard feedback and affirmation from the others regarding their story. Several of the participants recalled that this was the best week of the program. However, the time limit of the meeting was ninety minutes, and not all had time to share and reflect on their story, and sufficient prayer was not spent for each one. It would be better to complete these assignments in a retreat-type setting where each one presented their story and heard feedback in one setting of an hour to several hours in length. The time constraints dictated that there were significant things left out of each one's story.

A third weakness of the project was the nature in which the curriculum was digested.

Each week the curriculum to be discussed was handed out at the beginning of the session and then read through, addressing discussion questions as they arose. It would have been better if the curriculum had been handed out a week ahead of time so the participants had a chance to read through it and raise any addition questions they might have had. As it was, much of the discussion time was cut short.

Improvements

There are several ways I could improve the program. I did little by way of introduction into the course, setting no expectations for the participants aside from the eight-week commitment. I should have presented the thesis of the program, goals, and expected commitments of the program in an introductory session. Though the program ran well in spite of this oversight, the two opening sessions lacked proper context and thus lacked the power and significance they were designed to carry. I would make the course last ten weeks, spreading out the current material and leaving time for leisurely conversation. The program is designed to enhance the relationships between the participants, and relationship requires communication. More time for conversation would have been a benefit.

I would extend the screen time fast. The screen time fast was easily one of the most influential pieces of the program. The case was well-made that screen time distraction threatens the space in the soul that receiving and expressing love requires. In that week more communication happened outside of the group, and more time was spent together outside of the group than any other week—in part because the men were bored and had nothing to do. Everyone else in their life was still invested in screens in their free-time. Though I would modify the fast somewhat after the first week, I would require some implementation of it for the remainder of the program.

I would add a retreat to the program where the men had a chance to give a full presentation of their story as well as ample opportunity to receive feedback to their story. The time where the men were spoken to by the other men in the group on the basis of their story of love was easily the most meaningful and relationship-strengthening time. There was more relational depth here to be gained if more time had been allotted.

Theological Emphasis

It is rare today that the church uses love as a metric of anything. Local churches are far more likely to look at degrees earned, schools attended, or ministry tenure than they are to look at the quality of love when considering a pastoral candidate. John makes the case that the one who loves God will be known by their love for people and love for God is supposed to be the single most important command in all the Bible. It is stunning that the quality of one's love is rarely even addressed in a pastoral search process.

Love is favorite word of Christians today, and it appears on most material a church produces, but the practical demonstration of it doesn't appear in proportion to the use of the word. Love has been pulled from the realm of simple obedience by dependence on the Spirit and enabling of God and into a place of feeling or impulse. Love isn't complicated, it is the impulse of the Holy Spirit, the heart of God, and the command for believers. To be a friend of God is to love Him and to love His people.

Christians, or those who mistakenly believe they are Christians, have taken the command to love far too lightly. Failure to wrestle with the weight of Jesus' commands to love God and to love others has allowed those who claim Christianity to wallow in spiritual infancy or worse. When the gravity of God's commands to love (as demonstrated by Jesus) is ignored, Christians excuse themselves from the demands of growth, demands that require divine

enablement to complete. In this, they neither walk with God, nor are exposed to their desperation. Wrestling with the requirements to love draws one to humble daily dependence on the enabling of the Holy Spirit.

Personal Conclusions

I engaged in the program as a participant, being the sixth man. As the leader and author, my experience in the program was not the same as the other participants. However, I found the practices challenging. Many elements of the screen time fast remain with me today, much to my benefit. Scripture memory was a practice I had fallen out of, and my enjoyment of that has been renewed. Many of the practices, most of which are accepted spiritual disciplines, were reengagements for me with accountability.

But more than this, though I did not schedule a day for me to be the recipient of love, during the fourth week, all of the participants went out of their way to demonstrate love to me. As a pastor early in his tenure at Nags Head Church, I have found friends. Men who come to help, who ask how I am doing and really want to know, and more importantly men who I know well enough to love well. As we wrapped up the program immediately the guys had two more groups lined up to start the curriculum with as soon as I could give them edited copies. They were anxious not just to re-run the program, but to continue to grow in love for God and others through it.

APPENDIX 1
PRE-PROGRAM SURVEY

The following evaluation is designed to measure the relational investment of the men in the mentoring program. The relational investment is measured between both the man and God, and the man and others in his life. This evaluation will be used as a pre/post-test.

Date: _____

Last four digits of phone # _____

Directions: Please mark the appropriate answer. Some questions may ask you to give your opinion using the following scale:

SD = Strongly Disagree

D = Disagree

DS = Disagree Somewhat

AS = Agree Somewhat

A = Agree

SA = Strongly Agree

- | | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 1. I have several deep and meaningful friendships. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 2. I spend time alone in communion with God on a daily basis. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 3. I am deeply committed to my church family. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 4. I volunteer on a weekly basis at church. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 5. I rarely, if ever, feel lonely. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 6. I never spend time staring at a screen (phone, tablet, television) within the first fifteen minutes of waking up. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 7. I never feel numb, and am happy or sad as circumstances merit. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

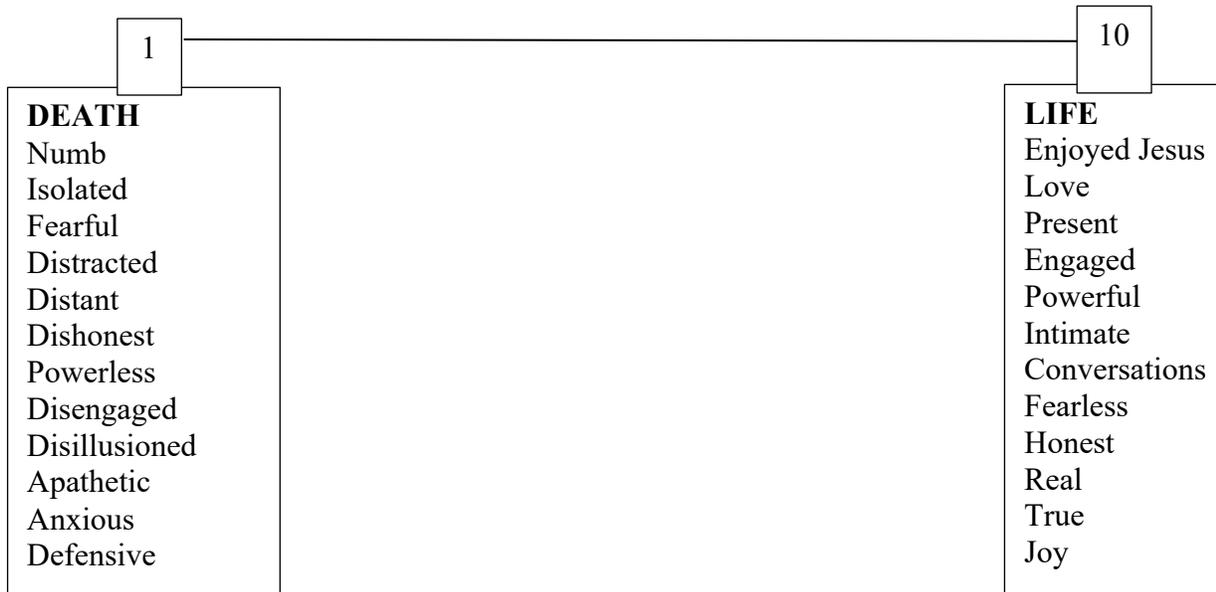
8. I enjoy intimate conversation with family and friends several times a week.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
9. I am very honest, even in areas that are embarrassing or shameful for me.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
10. When I am with friends, I am engaging with them, not staring at a screen.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
11. I regularly and sacrificially give to God's work.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
12. I rarely, if ever, feel anger.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
13. My friendships are deeply satisfying, lacking nothing.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
14. I have people to whom I feel comfortable revealing my heart (sorrows, pains, sins, fears, hopes and joys).	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
15. My relationship with God brings me great joy.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
16. My relationship with God never fills me with a burdensome sense of obligation and guilt.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

17. My relationship with God is something I frequently talk about with my friends.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
18. When I think about Jesus and His return to call me home, I am deeply moved.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
19. Expressing adoration to God on a regular basis is very important to me.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
20. Irrational fear is not a part of my life.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
21. When I am confronted with pain or stress, I talk about it with God and friends.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
22. Journaling is a regular part of my week.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
23. I spend time in prayer every day, apart from thanking God for my food.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
24. Every week I try to memorize a portion of Scripture.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
25. Family and friends say I'm frequently distracted or disengaged.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
26. Family and friends say I'm a good listener.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

- | | | | | | | |
|---|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 27. Family and friends complain that my mind wanders in conversation. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 28. Most of my downtime is spent staring at a screen. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 29. I am really grateful to God on a daily basis for what He has done for me. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 30. I'm seldom anxious, and then only when there is a good reason. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

APPENDIX 2
LIFE-DEATH SPECTRUM TOOL

The following is a format for answering the question, “How are you doing?” It is designed to encourage open and honest conversation in the weekly meetings by asking specific questions that force men to get beyond the usual one-word answers to the question. Not only does the tool get beneath the one-word answers, it also forces men to answer that question in terms of internal health (spiritual, emotional, and physical) rather than based solely on external circumstances. A healthy week may well be one with significant negative external factors (such as a car breaking down, being fired, illness, etc.) Each participant in the program will be given five to eight minutes to answer the question. In answering, he will give a self-evaluation by assigning to himself a number on the scale below. In addition to assigning a number to himself, he will use the questions that follow describe why he gave himself that number.



- Where have you sought life outside of Jesus?
- Have you taken care of your body (eating/sleeping/exercising)?
- Have you enjoyed communion with God through His Word and His people?
- Have you been present in your relationships/conversations?
- In what ways have you hidden yourself from those close to you or God?
- Have you had real conversations with those close to you (spouse/kids/friends)?
- Have you been honest with God?
- Have you had joy?

APPENDIX 3

MINISTRY PROFESSIONAL EVALUATION RUBRIC

This is the rubric that the panel of ministry professionals will fill out for the evaluation of the program curriculum.

Evaluation Statements	Insufficient	Needs Attention	Sufficient	Exemplary
The curriculum is biblically based.				
The curriculum is relevant to the context.				
The workload requested is acceptable.				
The curriculum is in keeping with Nags head Church processes.				
The curriculum provides the platform for deeper relationships.				
The curriculum provides a platform for disengaging from screen time.				

APPENDIX 4
POST-PROGRAM SURVEY

This is the post-program survey. It includes every question from the pre-program survey, as well as questions that are designed to help the author refine the program.

Date: _____

Last four digits of phone # _____

Directions: Please mark the appropriate answer. Some questions may ask you to give your opinion using the following scale:

SD = strongly disagree

D = disagree

DS = disagree somewhat

AS = agree somewhat

A = agree

SA = strongly agree

- | | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 1. I have several deep and meaningful friendships. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 2. I spend time alone in communion with God on a daily basis. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 3. I am deeply committed to my church family. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 4. I volunteer on a weekly basis at church. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 5. I rarely if ever feel lonely. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 6. I never spend time staring at a screen (phone, tablet, television) within the first fifteen minutes of waking up. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 7. I never feel numb, and am happy or sad as circumstances merit. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

8. I enjoy intimate conversation with family and friends several times a week.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
9. I am very honest, even in areas that are embarrassing or shameful for me.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
10. When I am with friends, I am engaging with them, not staring at a screen.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
11. I regularly and sacrificially give to God's work.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
12. I rarely if ever feel anger.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
13. My friendships are deeply satisfying, lacking nothing.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
14. I have people to whom I feel comfortable revealing my heart (sorrows, pains, sins, fears, hopes and joys).	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
15. My relationship with God brings me great joy.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
16. My relationship with God never fills me with a burdensome sense of obligation and guilt.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

17. My relationship with God is something I frequently talk about with my friends.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
18. When I think about Jesus and his return to call me home, I am deeply moved.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
19. Expressing adoration to God on a regular basis is very important to me.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
20. Irrational fear is not a part of my life.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
21. When I am confronted with pain or stress, I deal with it by talking with God and friends.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
22. Journaling is a regular part of my week.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
23. I spend time in prayer every day, apart from thanking God for my food.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
24. Every week I try to memorize a portion of Scripture.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
25. Family and friends say I'm frequently distracted or disengaged.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
26. Family and friends say I'm a good listener.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

27. Family and friends complain that my mind wanders in conversation. SD D DS AS A SA
28. Most of my downtime is spent staring at a screen. SD D DS AS A SA
29. I am really grateful to God on a daily basis for what He has done for me. SD D DS AS A SA
30. I'm seldom anxious, and then only when there is a good reason. SD D DS AS A SA

31. Has a close friend commented on a difference in your life? If so, what was said?

32. Was there anything too challenging or uncomfortable about the program?

33. How would you have adjusted those parts?

34. Would you recommend this program to a friend? If so, how would you describe it?

35. Was the time commitment for the program reasonable?

APPENDIX 5
CURRICULUM

Week One: Freedom

Introduction

For years, books and programs have been written that offer men a path to greater intimacy with God. And yet given this variety, a major stream of spiritual growth has been only tangentially utilized.

Generally speaking, spiritual growth programs fall into two categories: those that advocate modifying behavior, and those that advocate increasing knowledge. Both of those categories have substantial subcategories, some more relational than others, such as mentoring. Though there is growth available through all these programs, love between believers, important as the Bible declares it to be, is rarely utilized as the primary path to intimacy with God.

An arena that this study explores is that of love. From 1 John, we can see that love between believers is an essential ingredient in one's love for God. Love between believers functions as both a test of one's love for God, and as reception and expression of one's love for God. As we pursue love in this manner, we will utilize knowledge gains and behavior modifications as tools in the primary pursuit of loving one another and loving God. This is in contrast to pursuing knowledge gains or behavior adjustments as an expression of love for God.

In order to pursue love, the first two sessions are devoted to removing obstacles that hinder our reception and expression of love. The next four sessions are devoted to the theological and practical explanation of the way love works in 1 John. The seventh lesson is devoted to listening to men's stories, and the final session concludes John's use of love in 1 John 4.

For this study to accomplish its intent, the love of the participants for each other must grow. Love will be the evidence and the motivation of their love for God growing. To that end, we utilize several opening tools in the time we meet, as well as have practical assignments to complete throughout the week. The meetings are ninety minutes in length, and the assignments take one to three hours per week depending on the week.

Each session begins with a meal, or some other time of fellowship. During the meal participants each answer in two minutes or less the question, "How are you doing?" The Life-Death Spectrum tool is used to aid in answering this question.

After each person has answered the question, each person prays for the person to their right. The essence of that prayer is both thanking God for that person, and requesting God's favor on their behalf.

After this the study begins with an opening question. At several points, the group is given opportunities to discuss the subject material through discussion questions.

Check In

- How are you doing? Answer according to the Life and Death Spectrum.
- Opening Discussion: In two minutes or less, what you would do with absolute freedom from authority?

A classmate of mine in seminary was called to minister to homeless people in New York City. He once said something that fascinated me regarding freedom: “Homeless people are the embodiment of the central American value, freedom.” By that he meant that no one told them when to wake up or go to sleep, when to work or not, when to pay bills, or how much, where to live or for how long. No one made them wait for hours in DMV lines to register a car, or pass a test. No one made them go to the dentist. In short, they do what they want, when they want.

Discussion Questions

- Would you define a homeless lifestyle as one of freedom? Why or why not?
- In what ways does a homeless person embody freedom? In what ways does a homeless person not embody freedom?

Freedom is a deeply held value for which people have died throughout the ages. From William Wallace to Patrick Henry, heroes of nations have fought and died to gain freedom for themselves, or to grant it to others. And fighting for freedom is heroic; Jesus fought to bring freedom to people. In fact, in His first sermon in Luke 4:18, He quotes Isaiah 61, saying,

*“...He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed...”*

Read the following passages:

Jesus answered them, Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35 The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. John 8:34

Real freedom is from external *and* internal tyrants.

Freedom, real freedom, is not merely external. It must be internal as well. In fact, the most tyrannical of masters isn't any form of government or dictator. It is the tyrant that lives inside every person. Paul calls this part of the believer the flesh.

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. 15 For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Romans 7:14

Most of us are familiar with this tyrant. It is the thing that pulls us to do what we shouldn't do—whether that be eating too much, drinking too much, inappropriate sexual activity, manipulating others, or many other sins.

While we may understand the *idea of freedom* involving the ability to say no to specific sins, *the feeling of freedom* may not only be unfamiliar but also uncomfortable. Practically speaking, **the hollow and hungry feeling that comes from denying a desire of the flesh is what freedom feels like.** Some have described the feeling of freedom as the experience of Wylie Coyote who just realized he has run off the edge of the cliff.

Here are some situations where the feeling of freedom becomes clearer:

- You fought with your wife last night—she may have been right, you are not sure, but you know you ended up saying things you regret. You wake up early feeling like a failure, and hungry for screen distractions. Freedom looks like denying that hunger and engaging with uncertainty, fear, and regret.
- Your quarterly review didn't go well, and you have been put on probation. You feel an unbelievable anger welling up inside you. Freedom looks like denying that rage and moving through the feelings of failure.
- Your good friend has asked you the question you always avoid, the one that makes you feel weak and ignorant, exposing your vulnerabilities—"Why do you always do...?" As usual, the impulse to mix some bluster with deceit and change the conversation to avoid exposure rises up. Freedom feels like answering the question slowly, honestly, and humbly, and without manipulation, allowing your friend to respond however they wish.
- You finish up from a long tough work week, but just as soon as you walk in the door, your spouse unloads on you for neglecting your duties around the house. You feel a combination of indignation and outrage that motivates a stern defensiveness. Freedom feels like denying the desire to defend and engaging with your spouse.
- You find out you have been left out of a gathering of friends or siblings that you identify with and belong to. You see pictures of the gathering (which looks like an even better time than normal) on social media and are filled with the urge to numb the pain with a few drinks. Freedom feels like staying with the pain and refusing to disengage.

Freedom has always been the reward of the brave and courageous. Always. It is the reward of the strong. The courageous often win freedom for others, but freedom is seldom achieved without courage.

Paul says that believers were called to freedom.

*For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but **through love serve one another.** 14 For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Galatians. 5:13*

When Jesus made believers free, He had a purpose. That purpose was so that believers could love each other well. To receive and extend real love, one must pursue freedom from the internal tyrant.

Discussion Question

- Review the examples above. If freedom is necessary to express and receive love, in what ways have you missed out on love?

The internal tyrant demands obedience in every area, and every submission to this tyrant affects our ability to love and be loved, regardless of whether or not we feel the context is relational. Whether or not you reign in your thoughts when you wake up will affect your reception and extension of love throughout the day—even though no one else was awake or knew your thoughts.

We can (and most do) live under authority structures that do not honor God. And yet sin is not something those structures force on us, but a decision we make to surrender to the internal tyrant.

God told Cain, “*sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it*” (Gen. 4:7b). Sin mastered Cain and, apart from the bondage-breaking work of Jesus, has been the master over everyone ever since. John puts this in the context of love. “...we should love one another. We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother”(1 John 3:11b-12a). The internal tyrant will always seek his own at the expense of others, he will be selfish and self-centered, universally defensive, angry and bitter, manipulative, fearful, insecure, and, in a word, ugly.

The Holy Spirit leads us into freedom from the tyrant. Paul says this in *Galatians 5:16*, “*But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.*”

Victory against the tyrant is achieved only through walking by the Holy Spirit. He is the one that gives us the strength to face our insecurities, our hungers, and our distractions. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us the strength to live in the freedom Jesus bought for us. He enables us not only to face our fears, but to resolve them and to live in freedom.

Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of Ephesians 3:14-19 lays out the connection between the strengthening role of the Holy Spirit and our ability to receive love (which results in Christian maturity).

*“I ask him to **strengthen you by his Spirit**-not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength - that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask*

him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all Christians the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God."

If you want to love God and receive His love, or love others and receive love from them, **you must be free**. One of the most significant obstacles to feeling God's love is your flesh. The plan of evil is not primarily to drive you to sin, but to blind you from God's extraordinary and specific love for you. The flesh attempts to keep us from enjoying God's love, recognizing it, and receiving the good circumstances of life as demonstrations of His affection.

Discussion Question

- Pick one of the examples above and answer the following question: How could the *reception* and *expression* of love be impacted by your responses to those situations?

As you think about the reception of God's love for you, what are the things (memories, events, practices, agreements or commitments) that keep you from realizing God's love for you?

Practices:

- In Group:

- List two topics/conversations that draw out defensiveness, and share them with the group.
- List the areas where your internal tyrant has strongholds.
- This week:
 - FAST—24 hours without food. If you use food to comfort or numb yourself, a fast will identify your inner tyrant very quickly. You will be exercising your will (freedom) by denying food to your body.
 - Memorize the text of Jesus' first public sermon (Luke 4:18-19).

Week Two: Distraction

Check In

- How are you doing? (Answer according to the Life-Death Spectrum)
- How did the Scripture memory go?
- Did the fast acquaint you with your inner tyrant?

- Prayer—pray for the person to your right.

Introduction

According to CNN, the average American spent more than four hours a day on their phone in 2020, and spent \$112 billion on in-app purchases, a 25 percent increase over 2019.¹ Emarketer reported that for 2020, the average American spent almost eight hours on a screen (TV, computer, phone).² Time on a phone tends to be spent in isolation while time on a TV or computer may or may not be time spent in isolation. Is there a relationship between the amount of time spent on a screen and one's life with God?

When I was nine or ten years old, my younger brother and I decided to make a hang glider. My dad had been a pilot, and his stories of flight had always seemed

¹ Samantha Murphy Kelly, "It's OK if you've you're your phone too much this year," *CNN Business*, published December 23, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/23/tech/screen-time-2020/index.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+rss%2Fcnn_top_stories+%28RSS%3A+CNN+-+Top+Stories%29.

²"US adults added 1 hour of digital time in 2020," *Insider Intelligence*, published January 26, 2021, <https://www.emarketer.com/content/us-adults-added-1-hour-of-digital-time-2020?ecid=NL1001>.

wonderful to us. It was our plan to make some similar stories for ourselves.

We found some abandoned 1” plumbing pipe in the woods, made a rough “V” shaped frame out of it, and duct-taped a tarp to it. It was heavy and ungainly, but it sort of resembled a hang-glider. We took it to the top of our hill and ran down the hill with it to see if it would get air.

Success! Sure enough it got an air cushion of three or four feet under it. We were thrilled. Our next step was to add some weight to it, something that would resemble one of us. Our dog seemed about right. So we strapped him into a harness and ran down the hill again—this time with his running aiding our attempt at speed. This time we got even better results, four to five feet off the ground.

Encouraged by this success, and determined to soar over trees, we determined the next step was to find a higher launch pad.

We had climbed the ladder with the dog, and dragged the hang-glider onto the second story roof when my dad caught us. I never heard him swear, but judging by the look on his face when he saw us, I think he came close that afternoon.

This is one story of many from that time—stories of those who grew up before the age of the internet could capture our interest without end and without repeating. The ingredients that make such stories seem to be nothing more than lazy summer afternoons and boredom—time and boredom created some of my most enjoyable childhood memories.

Take turns reading through the verses below:

But the Lord is in His holy temple; let everyone on earth be silent in His presence.

Habakkuk 2:20 (HCSB)

Let all people be silent before the Lord, for He is coming from His holy dwelling.”

Zechariah 2:13 (HCSB)

Be silent before the Lord God!

For the day of the Lord is near;

the Lord has prepared a sacrifice

and consecrated his guests.

Zephaniah 1:7 (ESV)

Be silent before the Lord God!

For the day of the Lord is near;

the Lord has prepared a sacrifice

and consecrated his guests.

Job 40:4-5

Be still, and know that I am God.

I will be exalted among the nations,

I will be exalted in the earth!

Psalm 46:10 (ESV)

Instead, I have calmed and quieted myself

like a little weaned child with its mother;

I am like a little child.

Psalm 131:2 (HCSB)

The Bible has a lot to say about stillness. In these verses the point is made that God reveals Himself, or people perceive God, in stillness. Without the stillness it is difficult or perhaps even impossible to know much of God, not to mention have a relationship of love or closeness to Him.

Discussion Questions

- Where is the boredom today?
- When was the last time you sat down with a couple hours and experienced a complete lack of things to do? No hobbies, no screens, and no obligations, just you and your thoughts?
- Do you miss stillness?

Screens have had a lot to do with the loss of stillness. We can binge watch on any number of streaming services. We can play any number of games on any number of systems, we can zone out in front of YouTube while it auto-plays videos that are only slightly interesting to us. We can scroll through a social media feed for infinity. We can read news articles or watch cable TV. We can play video games—once the arena of middle school boys—for hours without end. We can do all of this—all the time. For

many men, I wouldn't doubt that it's been years since they enjoyed an extended period of stillness. For many the earliest memories (and pre-memories) are filled with screens, not of a family meal, an afternoon at a park, or even a birthday party.

I wonder how many favorite stories, how many enjoyable moments of creativity, daring, and triumph have been willingly sacrificed for screen addictions of one sort or another. Sir Isaac Newton was sent home from London to be quarantined in the country for a year when the Great Bubonic plague hit England. He was 23. In that year, called his year of wonders, he invented calculus. Stillness, for all the anxiety it produces today, has been the garden bed of some of history's greatest advances.

So what does stillness feel like? What does the freedom from a screen feel like? If I'm honest, moments of boredom have that hollow hungry feeling...the feeling of freedom. I don't doubt that Newton had to pass through boredom to get to calculus. And yet we try to avoid the feelings of boredom as best we can.

The birth of the internet (as the culmination of technological advances in media in the last two centuries—radio, TV, cable, movies) has changed life in remarkable ways. But it has changed more than the way we live, it has changed the way we think, and not just the way we think, but the actual shape of the brain.

In *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr claims the brain has been changed by the internet, beginning even with the physical structures, something he calls brain plasticity. "We become neurologically what we think."³ While this plasticity in the brain may seem to be a benefit, it comes with the contrasting reality: once the brain has been changed in a

³ Carr, *The Shallows*, 33.

certain way, “Routine activities are carried out ever more quickly and efficiently, while unused circuits are pruned away.”⁴ The ability to receive information from things like reading becomes arduous, while the ability to receive information from a video format feels effortless. More than the enjoyment of reading is lost in this transition, for the internet capitalizes on a frenzied mind.

One clear demonstration of a good engine design is that race crews have adopted the engine for use in amateur racing. The Volkswagen Beetle was produced with a very simple but high quality 1192 cc engine. Racing enthusiasts soon began to utilize that engine, modifying it for higher performance. A friend of mine was on a pit crew of an amateur racecar utilizing that engine. They had modified it so that it would routinely run between 8,000 and 10,000 rpms on the track. The engine would scream as the car flew by the pit at break-neck speed.

However, this engine failed during one race where a throttle cable was stuck open. As the gas poured in, the engine passed its normal rev limit and kept climbing. Without an ability to cut off the gas, the engine spun faster and faster, finally melting down after reaching 20,000 rpms. It was remarkable that the engine could reach that speed—but it was also a given that it would never run again.

Discussion Question

- Do you feel as though your mind is constantly running, that from the moment you wake up till the moment you fall asleep, your thoughts are never at

⁴ Carr, 34.

rest?

The new patterns of thinking that Carr describes aren't good patterns. He writes, "The distractions in our lives have been proliferating for a long time, but never has there been a medium that, like the Net, has been programmed to so widely scatter our attention and to do it so insistently."⁵ Carr argues that the web is funded through ads—little pieces of information that pop up, rotate, and bounce onto our screen every few seconds. The ads are only successful if they generate a response from the viewer, a click. Fundamentally the internet depends on and rewards distraction—the inability to focus or think deeply. The entertainment offerings today have been surreptitiously cutting the connection between body and soul. When that is severed, the ability to engage in real communion with God is lost.

The stillness the psalmist practiced when he wrote, "I have stilled and quieted my soul" (Psalm 131:2) is not possible for the mind entrenched in a world of screens. And that separation is not a small thing or easily done. "...the net may well be the single most powerful mind-altering technology that has ever come into general use."⁶ The use of it is robbing humanity of the ability to engage with God. "Our ability to engage in 'meditative thinking'...might become a victim of headlong progress."⁷

The plasticity of the brain has implications for how addictions are developed and quantified. It has even been suggested that general screen time, or internet use, can

⁵ Carr, 113.

⁶ Carr, 116.

⁷ Carr, 222.

produce addiction-like changes in a person.⁸ Particularly troubling is how social media use in particular (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) is affecting the brain in ways that short-circuit the will. Mark Griffiths writes, “There is clearly emerging evidence that a minority of social network users experience addiction-like symptoms as a consequence of their excessive use.”⁹

Addiction is not the only negative pattern emerging from screen time. In a 2017 article, Madhav, Serchand, and Serchan found a direct correlation between screen time and depression. “Results showed that moderate or severe depression level was associated with higher time spent on TV watching and use of computer (> 6 h/day)...TV watching and computer use can predict the depression level among adults.”¹⁰

When sexual stimulation is combined with the addictive/depressive components of time in the virtual world, the plasticity of the brain is directly affected. Donald Hilton argues this in his article, “Pornography Addiction—a Supranormal Stimulus Considered in the Context of Neuroplasticity.” There he writes, “This addictive effect may be amplified by the accelerated novelty and the ‘supranormal stimulus’ (a phrase coined by Nikolaas Tinbergen) factor afforded by Internet pornography.”¹¹ To put

⁸ Mark Griffiths, “A ‘components’ model of addiction within a biopsychosocial framework,” *Journal of Substance Use* 10, no. 4 (August 2005): 191-97, <https://addictionpsychologist.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/griffiths-2005-addiction-components.pdf>.

⁹ Mark Griffiths, “Social Networking Addiction: Emerging Themes and Issues,” *Addiction Research & Therapy* 4, no. 5 (2013): 1-2, http://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/25994/1/221567_PubSub2932_-Griffiths.pdf.

¹⁰ K.C. Madhav, Shardulendra Prasad Sherchand, and Samendra Sherchan, “Association between screen time and depression among US adults,” *Elsevier Preventive Medicine Reports* 8, (2017): 67-71, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5574844/>.

¹¹ Donald L. Hilton, Jr., “Pornography addiction—a supranormal stimulus considered in the context of neuroplasticity,” *Socioaffective Neuroscience & Psychology*, published July 19, 2013, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3960020/>.

it simply, pornography changes your brain—it actually looks different in a scan than the brain of a person who is not consuming pornography.

Pornography is a useful onramp in the discussion of why screens have so much of our time and attention. Seth Taylor writes in *Feels Like Redemption*, “Porn isn’t the problem; it’s a medication for the problem. Like any pain pill porn serves the purpose of keeping us from becoming conscious of the *real* problem.”¹² Pornography is simply one of the more enticing distractions that keep us from dealing with life as it is, with all the heights of joy and the depth of sorrows.

Discussion Question

- What’s your best guess at the pain you hide from through screen use, pornographic or otherwise?

It is my assumption that most if not all young men have viewed or are viewing sexually stimulating material through a screen in the course of a week. There is a supposedly true anecdote about famed theology professor Howard Hendricks, the author of *Living By the Book*, who, as a more than 80-year-old man, was once asked how old he was when he stopped struggling with lust. He answered, “I’ll let you know.” Whether demonstrated through explicit images, fantasizing, or inappropriate sexual behavior, lust is a common factor among men and women today, but it is one that Jesus gives as the victory to overcome.

¹² Seth Taylor, *Feels Like Redemption* (Los Angeles: Fireproof Ministries, Inc., 2014), 60.

I know it's not fair to put all screen time activities (TV, movies, social media, gaming, etc.) in one category, but if we did, we would have to put a negative assessment on that category—this stuff is robbing us of far more than great stories; it is fundamentally robbing us of one of the most essential elements of our humanity—our souls. As we lose connection to our souls, we lose the ability to relate to God—to hear from Him and identify His work. You can stuff your brain so full of noise, confusion, and distraction that real communion with God is no longer possible. There is a real answer to the following questions:

Discussion Questions

Have you ever wondered:

- Why don't I sense the leading of God?
- Why does the Bible seem dry when I read it?
- Why does prayer seem like an exercise in futility—like I am talking to no one?

Not only is communion with God compromised by screen distractions, so is communion with other people.

- Why aren't deep and meaningful soul level conversations a regular part of my week?
- Why don't have I have several profound friendships?
- Why do I feel invisible at times?

The baseline of the human mind used to be stillness, a place where one could

freely engage with God. The baseline is now a frenetic attempt to process the movie I watched last night, the news I read this morning, the neighbor's friend's cat that got posted on social media after it had surgery—and on and on it goes.

If you want to love God and love others, you must be comfortable coming out of the distractions provided by screens. One rarely if ever finds God in the distraction and chaos of life. David says in Psalm 46:10 “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”

The stillness precedes the knowing of God. Without the stillness you cannot know Him. The enemies of that stillness—the things that change your brain, that warp your ability to think deeply, that frustrate even your ability to read anything longer than two paragraphs—these things come through screens.

Psalm 131 conveys a sense of the stillness required to meet God. It is psalm of ascent—that is, it is one the Israelites would sing as they traveled up to the Temple to worship God at one of the feasts. They sang this to prepare themselves to enter the physical presence of God.

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up;

my eyes are not raised too high;

I do not occupy myself with things

too great and too marvelous for me.

But I have calmed and quieted my soul,

like a weaned child with its mother;

like a weaned child is my soul within me.

O Israel, hope in the Lord

from this time forth and forevermore.

Psalm 131

The first verse focuses on restraining thoughts. In the twenty-first century at the click of the button we can be reading about the politics of India, the mudslides Indonesia, or the espionage of economics of Russian oil ventures—thoughts too rowdy and raucous for stillness with God. David—even the King of Israel—writes that he restrains his thoughts as he goes to meet God.

David then focuses on his soul—apparently David felt that his soul needed to be calmed and quieted in order to commune with God. If he felt the soul could get too overwhelmed in his time, would we think anything less of our souls in our time?

Finally, David concludes with an encouragement for his people to hope in the Lord. The things of this world, as demanding and chaotic and noisy as they are, will compete for our hope. Be it politics, social movements, or economics—elements of this world will clamor for the allegiance of our hope. But, David says, hope in the Lord.

Practices

For the next week, eliminate:

- Movies
- TV
- Gaming

- Social media engagement
- Internet browsing

For the next week:

- Put your cell phone on airplane mode at 8:00 PM and do not take it off airplane mode until you have been awake for at least half an hour in the morning.
- Have a friend lock social media apps, email apps, internet apps, and video apps on your phone for this week.
- Memorize Psalm 131
- In the place of these things allow yourself to be bored. If you must do something, consider:
 - Going for a walk
 - Taking a nap
 - Striking up a conversation with someone.
 - Exercising (run, bike, swim, surf, gym)
 - Journaling
 - Reading your Bible
 - Waiting on God.

Week Three: God is Love

Check In

- How are you doing? (Answer according to the Life-Death Spectrum)
- Did you enjoy the screen fast? Were you able to keep it? If not, what conclusions are you drawing from your inability to stay off of screens for one week?
- Did you memorize Psalm 131? Was it helpful during the screen fast?

- Prayer—pray for the person to your right.

Beloved, ⁷let us love one another, for love is from

Ἀγαπητοί → → ἀγαπῶμεν² → ἀλλήλους³ ὅτι⁴ ἡ ἀγάπη⁶ ἐστίν¹⁰ ἐκ⁷

God, and ^kwhoever loves has been born

τοῦ⁸ θεοῦ⁹ καὶ¹¹ → πᾶς¹² ὁ¹³ ἀγαπῶν¹⁴ → → γεγέννηται¹⁸

of God and knows God. ⁸Anyone who does not

ἐκ¹⁵ τοῦ¹⁶ θεοῦ¹⁷ καὶ¹⁹ γινώσκει²⁰ τὸν²¹ θεόν²² → → ►1 μὴ²

love does not know God, because ^mGod is

ὁ¹ ἀγαπῶν³ ►5 οὐκ⁴ ἔγνω⁵ τὸν⁶ θεόν⁷ ὅτι⁸ ὁ⁹ θεὸς¹⁰ ἐστίν¹²

love .

ἀγάπη¹¹

ἀγάπη

NNSF

Discussion Question

- What has been the most wonderful experience with God’s people that you have had? Why was it wonderful?

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”¹³ 1 John 4:7-8

Love changes things. It always has. Memories of being on the receiving end of love are often the most clear and powerful memories we have. For some, those memories are too few. The church has been designed by God to represent Him to the world. If God is doing anything in the world today, He is doing it in and through His church. It would follow that church then, should be known first and foremost as a place that loves—because John tells us that God is love.

John uses the word love 57 times in his gospel and 46 times in his first epistle. For this and related reasons, John is called the apostle of love. While the gospel of John focuses on God’s love for people, the first epistle of John focuses on people’s love for each other and for God.

¹³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version.

1 John 4:7-8 shows that God is love, and He is the Initiator of the love believers demonstrate. Love is a ubiquitous Christian value. It is so important that it is found on Christian buildings, bulletins, mission statements, core value statements, and weekly sermon application points. Jesus states that the greatest commandment is to love God and the second is like it, to love others (Mat 22:37-40; Mark 12:28-32). Jesus claims that these two commandments are the summation of the whole law (Mat 22:40). Jesus also prays about the love of Christians for one another. “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”¹⁴ Jesus prays that His love will be in believers, that is, experienced and expressed. Churches are on solid biblical ground to emphasize love in everything they do.

And yet the church in America today is in decline. To our great disappointment, there is no connection between the frequency of the word on our materials or the trendiness of the fonts we write it in to the actual practice of love. Perhaps more is required of us than the repetition of the word. The Apostle John, the “Apostle of Love” makes the argument that real Christian love is the product of real intimacy with God.

In 1 John 4:7, John makes a clear encouragement for believers to love each other. The reason they should love each other is that love comes from God. John uses a word for love in this passage that expresses the ideas of self-sacrifices and lack of conditions. Love as John is using it here is a standard not easily met.

¹⁴ John 17:26.

Discussion Question

- Have you tried to find love outside of God? The love that you have experienced, is that from God?
- What are the normal ways to “find love” today?

The next point John makes is that people who love other people have met two qualifications. They have been born of God (they have believed in Jesus for eternal life) and they know God. The idea behind the word for “know” isn’t distant, but intimate. John’s claim is that the person who loves is an intimate friend of God.¹⁵

Explanation from the Text

“Beloved” (agapetos, a person who is in a special, close relationship with another¹⁶) is John’s term for the believers in the churches to whom he is writing. It is a common term in the book, occurring six times in five short chapters.¹⁷ It is the noun form of the verb agapao, “to love.” Lexham Theological Wordbook defines the word, “to love, to esteem, to like. This verb refers to a kind of love that expresses personal will and affection rather than emotions or feelings.”¹⁸

The noun and verb are placed immediately next to each other, with both root

¹⁶ J Langford, *Lexham Theological Wordbook: Friendship*, eds. D. Mangum, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, and R. Hurst (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

¹⁷ John 2:7, 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11.

¹⁸ R. P. Nettelhorst, *Lexham Theological Wordbook: Love*, eds. D. Mangum, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, and R. Hurst (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

repetition and alliteration highlighting the topic of the verse. John goes to great lengths to emphasize love. The verb is in an encouragement to act. D. L. Akin says it this way, “He loves them and will now challenge them to love others as well. The reflexive phrase ‘let us love one another’ (agapōmen) occurs three times in this passage. Here in v. 7 it is an exhortation...¹⁹” The mood of the verb is not quite as strong as a command, but that softness might well be due more to the tone of the passage.²⁰ In support of the soft tone interpreting the verb, C. G. Kruse says, “He addresses his readers as ‘dear friends’ (agapētoi), expressing something of his affection for them and introducing a matter for which he wants their special attention, as he frequently does in this letter.”²¹

But the encouragement is not without reason. In the phrases that follow John is providing the theological basis for the command to love that he has already repeated in two other places in the letter (3:11, 23). John expounds on the implicit reason that the “beloved” should love one another. “For” translates a *hoti* clause, indicating cause or reason. The reason to love is that love is from God, and love demonstrates a relationship with God.

Marshall writes, “Thus he begins by grounding his appeal in the fact that love comes from God. It has its origin in God and belongs to the divine sphere.”²²

¹⁹ D. L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 38:177.

²⁰ George Strecker concurs, “The injunction to love one another is nothing other than a repetition of the commandment of love of the sisters and brothers enunciated in 3:10-11.” George Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, trl. Linda M. Maloney, ed. Harold Attridge (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996), 143.

²¹ C. G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 156.

²² Howard I. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1978), 211.

Love comes from God. It is how He demonstrates Himself.

Discussion Questions

- What attribute of God has been foremost in your experience of Him? Tell a story of how you have identified that experience.
- What experiences have obscured God's love for you?

Though love is not a new topic in the letter, John is adding theological backing to its practice. Yarborough states, "Most of the occurrences [of love] thus far [in the letter] speak of the exercise of love in the ethical sphere...But if John found it necessary earlier to spell out with almost pedantic clarity the command that Christians have had 'from the beginning' (2:7-8), it is no wonder that he now moves to fortify the theological foundation of the imperative to love."²³

The idea of love being sourced in God is central to the verse and the larger argument John is making about love. The preposition *ek* is the Greek word translated "from." It indicates the idea of origin or source.²⁴ Love emanates from God. It is sourced in Him and no other.

The next phrase, "everyone who loves has been fathered by God," is not part of the *hoti* clause, meaning it is not a second reason for the beloved to love. It is simply an additional statement about the nature of love and its representation in people.

²³ Robert W. Yarborough, *1-3 John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 235.

²⁴ Yarborough states, "Its supernatural origin in the Father makes it most to be cherished among those who claim to be God's children." Yarborough, *1-3 John*, 235.

“Fathered by God” is a phrase used by John to indicate one who has received the free gift of salvation. The verb “born” (*gennaō*) is a perfect active indicative, indicating a completed past action. Judith Lieu writes, “It is only the one who expresses love as it has been urged throughout the letter, ‘let us love one another,’ who is truly in relationship with God, who is love.”²⁵ Before moving to the next phrase, it is important to note the absolute sense of the verse introduced by the word *pas*, or, “all.”

John states that *everyone* who loves meets the two conditions of being God’s child and knowing Him.

The last phrase of the verse introduces a second condition of those who practice love. Not only are they children of God (sourced from God, just as love is sourced from God) but also they are in fellowship with God. The verb “to know” translates *ginosko*, meaning, “to know, understand, acknowledge.”²⁶ Strecker rightly argues that *ginosko* means “acknowledge,” “This is clear from the last line of the verse: *kai ginoskie ton Theon* does not refer to a theoretical ‘knowing’ or ‘understanding,’ but to acknowledging God.”²⁷ The verb “to know” is a third person singular present indicative, indicating an ongoing action. The person is a child of God, and knows God. Stephen Smalley keeps these concepts separated, “...he means not only an attitude of love (or

²⁵ Judith Lieu, *1, 2, 3, John* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 178.

²⁶ J. K. Garrett, *Lexham Theological Wordbook: Knowledge*, eds. D. Mangum, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, and R. Hurst (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

²⁷ Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 144.

being loving) but also the practice of love. Such love, John maintains, is the test and criterion both of being regenerate and of knowing God.”²⁸

Akin summarizes the importance of the perfect tense in verse seven well when he states, “The perfect tense of ‘born’ would include the initial rebirth of the individual and the continuing effects this would have in their life, and the present tense of ‘know’ emphasizes that the individual is continuing to grow in knowledge of God.”²⁹ The distinct timestamp on the same verb, just a few words apart, should not be overlooked. In verse 7, John says that those who love are born (perfect, indicating past action) of God (indicating regeneration) and that they are in a “knowing” relationship with Him (present, indicating ongoing action). In verse 8, John states that those who do not love are not currently “knowing” (aorist—indicating immediacy or possibly even an absent time stamp) God. More clearly stated, in verse 7, John is simply saying that those who love have not only been born again, but are walking with God. To love is not just to know God but to be in unhindered fellowship with Him.

If someone does not love, what does that say about his/her relationship with God? John answers that question in verse 8. The subject of verse 8 is implied through the participle “love” in the Greek, and “the one who loves” is a fair translation of the subject.³⁰ As discussed above, the verb “to know” here is aorist, indicating timeless value. The claim of verse 8 is simply this: anyone who is not demonstrating love, is not, in that moment, knowing God.

²⁸ Stephen S. Smalley, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1, 2, 3 John* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 51:226-227.

²⁹ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 177–178.

³⁰ Bruce G. Schuchard, *1-3 John* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 438.

John gives a reason for the truth of this absolute statement by supplying another *hoti* clause. The reason they are not knowing God is that “God is love.” If one conflates born of God and knowing God in verse 7, then verse 8 becomes a statement indicating that failure to love is an indication that one is not born again.³¹ If however, one keeps the terms separated, as I have argued, John is not talking about whether or not one is born again at all (he does not use that language in verse 8). He is simply talking about the idea of knowing God. Even if “love” and “knowledge” are conflated, John chooses the second, more intimate verb in verse 8, meaning that every believer is in intimate relationship with God. Whichever view one adopts, intimacy with God is the point of verse 8.

John Stott captures the point of verse 8 well writing,

“For the loveless Christian to profess to know God and to have been born of God is like claiming to be intimate with a foreigner whose language we cannot speak, or to have been born of parents whom we do not in any way resemble. It is to fail to manifest the nature of him whom we claim as our Father (born of God) and our Friend (knows God).”³²

Conclusion

In these verses, John places the expression of Christian *agape* love as a result not only of being one of God’s children, but to walking in fellowship with God. The reason for this is that all love comes from God, being sourced in Him.

Without being connected to God, expressing Christian agape love is an impossibility.

³¹ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 177–178.

³² John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 163-164.

At the same time, the converse is true; being in close relationship with God requires the immediate demonstration of Christian *agape* love.

Discussion Question

- Why is it impossible to love without knowing and loving God?

The love Christians share is supernatural—of divine origin. It is the very love of God Himself flowing through us as we enjoy unhindered fellowship with Him. Akin captures the picture well when he writes, “Because his very nature is love, mercy and goodness flow from God like a beautiful river, as sunlight radiates from the sun. Love, real love (cf. 1 Cor 13), has its ultimate source and origin in God.”³³

This chapter identifies God as the Author of love. His love does not depart from Himself. If one is to love, one must be partaking in the character of God.

Practices

- What practices from this past week (screen fast) will you commit to carrying forward with you for the remainder of the program?
- For the next week:

³³ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 178–179.

- Stillness: Before you use your phone in the morning (aside from turning off the alarm), spend 15 minutes in silence and stillness—do nothing, look at nothing, listen to nothing.
- Use an app (such as the Pause App) for one minute or more of stillness throughout your day.
- Journal: answer three questions in a journal, handwritten, pen on paper:
 - How am I doing today?
 - What am I doing today?
 - What do I feel toward God?
- Memorize 1 John 4:7-8.
- Ask two or more of those close to you to pick three words to describe how you relate to them. Give them an opportunity to think deeply before they answer. Record their answers in your journal.

Week Four: Lack of Love

Check In

- How did journaling and stillness go?
- Was there anything surprising in the three words used to describe how you relate?
- How are you doing? (Answer according to the Life-Death Spectrum)

- Pray for the person to your right.

Discussion Question

- When have you seen Christians make excuses for not loving people? What circumstances make Christians prone to excuse themselves from the responsibility to love?

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes. 1 John 2:7-11

Summary

Just about every believer I know has had a bad experience with other believers. When I was an early teenager, my family had the painful experience of being asked to leave our church. We hadn't done anything to justify this request; years later the leaders of the church apologized for their mis-step, but I loved the church and the departure from our neighborhood church was painful—more painful than I realized at the moment. It shaped my understanding of myself, my family, the church and God.

Discussion Question

- Can people be believers and yet not love other believers well?

The love believers are asked by Jesus to demonstrate is of the same category of the love Jesus demonstrated by His incarnation, life and sacrificial death on the cross. To love like Jesus is a monumental task, and yet one every Christian is responsible to accomplish. Loving like Jesus is more than action, it is a mindset and a perspective on life. The idea of worldview is not too strong.

John uses the language of living in darkness and living in light to describe the difference between someone who walks with God, loving God and loving His people, and someone who claims to love God but loves neither God nor His people.

One of things to do in Eastern Pennsylvania where I grew up was to go spelunking. One system in particular, Crystal Caverns, had caves that went deep underground. Before our church asked us to leave, I was involved in the Sunday school program. One of our activities was to take a tour of the caves. There was a flimsy rope leading alongside a path on a ledge, the edge of which disappeared into the darkness below. A string of lights strung along the roof guided our path underground.

Once our guide had us fully and deeply lost inside the caverns, he stopped the tour along the path and turned off the lights. Instantly I lost my balance on the uneven path. The darkness was so thick I lost my bearings, feeling like I was falling and floating all at once. I reached out into the darkness, hoping to find the rope, or the wall, or anything that was solid to help steady myself. I will never forget the sensation of being totally without my bearings. At one point I think I crouched down—both to feel the floor with my hands and so I would be less likely to fall. The image of the darkness in the cave gets to the sense of how John is using darkness as a category.

Discussion Questions

- Have you ever seen someone who is “walking in darkness” and causing chaos and harm to those they claim to love?
- Have you been the one walking in darkness and causing harm to those you claim to love?

And yet, as John describes it, believers are in movement, walking around in danger, not knowing where they are going or what harm they are doing to themselves or their relationships.

Explanation from the Text

An exegesis of 1 John 2:7-11 shows that failure to love other believers indicates a failure to walk with God. In this passage John makes strong statements about the spiritual condition of “brothers” who hate. The thesis of these verses is that “brothers” who hate “brothers” are not walking with God. There are variant views on the

characters in the passage, but what all agree on is that a lack of love for the brothers indicates a lack of love for God.

John begins by addressing his audience with the term *agapetos*, the noun form of the verb to love. Raymond Brown writes, “This covenant designation is carried over into the NT epistles where Christians are God’s beloved who are called saints” (Rom 1:7).³⁴ Given this designation, the natural reading of the encouragement that follows is that it is directed toward the “saints.”

Before moving on to his “command,” John states that the command is an old one. “I am writing to you no new commandment.” The implication of this is that the audience has heard this command before, or in fact, many times before.

If the old command is the command to love one another from John 13:34, then why does John call it new in verse 8? David Allen makes a helpful distinction regarding the word new, *kainos*. “There are two different words for ‘new’ in the Greek New Testament. One means new with respect to time. The other word, the one John uses here means new with respect to quality.”³⁵

New then refers to quality—namely love of greater depth and intimacy as demonstrated by Jesus during the last hours of His earthly life.

Boice concurs, “It is new in the sense that it was raised to an entirely new emphasis and level by the teaching of Jesus.”³⁶ Boice cites three reasons that the love Jesus commanded and exemplified is new: the extent (love for all, not just friends and

³⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1984), 264.

³⁵ David Allen, *1-3 John* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 74.

³⁶ Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 65.

family), the length (death on the cross), and finally, the degree to which it is realized through the actions of Christ-followers.³⁷ The last element of Boice's list is particularly significant. Believers have the ability and responsibility to demonstrate the divine love of God (the extent and the length) toward other believers.³⁸

Discussion Questions

- Believers are to show the same quality of love that Jesus demonstrated by His death on the cross. Is this possible?
- Practically speaking, what would it look like for you to do this?

If you think loving others in the same manner that Jesus loves people, demonstrated by His death on the cross, is possible through your own commitment or ability, you haven't understood Jesus, what He has done for you, or His love. Outside divine enablement, the love John is calling us to demonstrate is impossible.

John continues his emphasis on the practical demonstration of love in the life of believers in the last phrase of verse 8, "the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining." The present indicative verbs, "pass away" (*parago*) and "shine" (*phaino*) indicate ongoing action.

As believers live the love of God, the darkness of the world becomes light.

³⁷ Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 65-66.

³⁸ Allen draws on the same idea when he states, "In John 13:35 Jesus continued, 'By this will all people know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' Jesus did not say people will know that we are his followers by our doctrinal orthodoxy but by our love." Allen, *1-3 John*, 75.

It is hard to underestimate the theme of illumination in the writing of the Apostle John. John 1:4-5 is the first mention of Jesus as light in John's Gospel, and it is preceded as a description of Jesus only by the statements in 1:1-3 (Jesus as the eternally existing Agent of Creation). The theme of the light/dark dichotomy found in John 1:4-5 ("In him was life, and the life was the light of men.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it") is no doubt part of the context of John's statement in 1 John 2:8. John continues throughout his Gospel to refer to Jesus' role as one who illuminates the dark world.³⁹ If the new and old command is to love, as has been argued here, the role of practical love from God's people to other people as a revelation of Jesus is firmly established. When a believer loves with God's love, knowledge of God (revelation) is extended and people are drawn to Jesus. This relationship has been established elsewhere in John's writing, namely the High Priestly Prayer. In John 20:23 Jesus prays that all believers will be unified so that the world will know that He is the Messiah.

Unity is a practical expression of Christian love, and it is the greatest tool of evangelism. Verses 7-8 tie the expansion of the kingdom of God to agape love being demonstrated in the life of believers. Having established that love is a command of Jesus, one that calls forth divine enablement in the extent, length, and practice of love, John makes a firm dichotomy between the practice of love and the practice of hate. One who hates is in darkness, and one who loves is in light. Determinations must be made on who

³⁹ John uses a form of light (phos) sixteen times in his Gospel. Every reference is to Jesus, and the illumination that He provides. The most significant of these statements is found in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world! The one who follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." John uses the same word five times in 1 John, also exclusively referencing Jesus and the illumination that He provides.

“the one who walks in darkness” is as well as “the one who abides in the light.”

Derickson gives a definition for those who walk in darkness and hate. “In this and the following verses, John will affirm that loving one’s brother demonstrates that one has a healthy relationship (is in fellowship) with God.”⁴⁰ He unpacks this saying, “By this John is affirming that some individuals in the body of Christ can and do claim to be walking in moral purity, and this in fellowship with God (in the light), while hating other Christians.”⁴¹

John’s focus in these verses does not seem to be on determining a litmus test for who is saved and who is not. Boice, in the conclusion of his treatment on this passage, gives three applications of Christian love, one of which is pertinent to this discussion: “First, it will mean that when a Christian has failed to love his brother and has therefore acted wrongly toward him, he will go to him and say he is sorry.”⁴² Here, Boice recognizes that believers will fail to love their brothers, and they should, in an act of love, seek forgiveness for that failure because it is not in keeping with fellowship with God. If not in his exegesis of the text, then in his application, Boice recognizes that a failure to love is possible for the believer and is a problem to be rectified. Derickson’s closing argument for identifying the one who hates as a possible member of the body of Christ is compelling. “The problem with this view [identifying the one who hates with John’s opponents] is that John says he hates his “brother,” and the religious opponents are not believers based on John’s description of them in 2:19.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 169.

⁴¹ Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 170.

⁴² Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 68-69.

⁴³ Derickson continues, “Wescott argues well that this and the other uses of ‘brother’ in the

Following Derickson’s position leads to the conclusion that John is dealing with believers in the passage, believers who walk in the light and believers who walk in the darkness. However, it is not only likely, but a given, that those who are not believers are also walking in darkness. This is in fact the force of John’s argument—one must live in newness of life, in the pattern and impetus of Jesus. To abdicate this responsibility is to live as though one does not have life (or, in fact, to not have life). Schnackenburg writes, “This is not just an old man constantly repeating himself, nor is it the pedantry of a moralist. No, the problem is so crucial that it surfaces from many different perspectives...”

Love of brother and sister is the essential prerequisite for fellowship with God.”⁴⁴

Discussion Questions

- Why would loving God’s people be a prerequisite for loving God?
- Is it possible to love God in isolation from other people?
- What are the exceptions to the responsibility to “love God’s people”?
- Is the love John advocates an action, feeling, lifestyle, or mindset?

epistle refer to fellow believers. He notes that ‘the title occurs significantly in the first record of the action of the church...and then throughout the apostolic writings (1 Thes 5:26; Gal 2:1; 1 Cor 5:1; Rom 16:14,&c.; 1 Tim 6:2; James 1:9; 1 Pet 5:12 &c; 3:14, 16; 3 John 3, 5, 10)...The singular is characteristic of this epistle, (vv.10, 11, 3:10, 15, 17, 4:20f, 5:16)... There is, as far as it appears, no case where a fellow-man, as man, is called “a brother” in the New Testament.’ Others reduce the meaning of *brother* to “those members of the Johannine Community” in theological agreement with the author (Brown, 84). This should not be seen as a reference to mankind (contra Brooke, 36).” Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 70-71.

⁴⁴ Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 107.

Love for fellow believers is then a twofold revelation. First, because love is from God, the expression of love reveals one is in fellowship with God. Secondly, because God loves His children, the expression of love for another reveals divine enablement of a human actor.

There are two categories of persons identified in the passage; the believers who love because of intimacy with God and those who do not love and do not have intimacy with God. John states that the one who claims to be “in the light” and hates is either lying or misinformed, “he is still in darkness.” That is, he is not walking in fellowship with God, his actions are contrary to the actions of God, and are not produced in any way by God.

In contrast to the one living in darkness is the one who loves his brother. John builds his argument on the expression of love or lack thereof. The one who hates declares he is not walking with God, the one who loves is passively declaring that he is walking with God. The ideas of walking with God and abiding with Him are synonymous.⁴⁵ Abiding is a key term for John, and, in the context of the contrast between verses 9-10, abiding stands out. It is absent from verse 9. Derickson states, “Here abiding has the sense of ‘dwelling’ somewhere—in this case in the sphere of light, which is moral purity. This same term is used repeatedly by Jesus in John 15:1-10 where abiding results in mutual relationship (mutual abiding), God’s influence in the lives of believers (fruitfulness), and their influence with God in answered prayer.”⁴⁶ The one who loves is

⁴⁵ Derickson writes, “John now affirms that the person who loves his brother is doing so in the context of God’s character. ‘Abides in the light’ is synonymous with ‘walking in the light’ in chapter 1 and ‘being in the light.’” Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 173.

⁴⁶ Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 174.

abiding with God. This recalls Jesus' words on this topic, "apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). A product of abiding in the light is that there is nothing that causes others to stumble. Who then is stumbling in the verse?⁴⁷ Derickson argues for two implications, "Nothing in the believer himself (including the light) will make him stumble."⁴⁸ Expressing God's love for believers, then, has two results. First, it keeps one from falling into sin. Hatred toward a brother (or bitterness, or indifference, etc.,) will lead one into sin and out of fellowship with God. Second, loving other believers keeps one in fellowship with God.

Discussion Questions

- Is all sin a violation of love for people? Why or why not?
- Why does loving people keep you in fellowship with God?

Verse 11 functions as a summary of the one walking in darkness. Three statements describe the hater: "in darkness," "walks in darkness," and "does not know where he is going." These statements are true because the hater is "blinded by darkness." Akin defines it this way, "Those who hate their brothers live in a state of darkness where there is not just an absence of love, but an absence of God. In this darkness the individual is exiled from fellowship with the Father, his Son Jesus Christ, and the believing community. Far from knowing God, those who hate their brothers walk around confused

⁴⁷ Akin raises the question implicit in the verse, "Does stumbling take place in the life of the believer, or does the believer cause others to stumble into the darkness?...It is possible that a man might cause others to stumble due to a lack of love, but when this verse is taken with 2:11, it would be best to interpret the clause as referring to the person himself who is stumbling." Akin, *1,2,3 John*, 99.

⁴⁸ Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 175.

and lost, not knowing where they are going...Spiritual darkness is not a passive reality. It goes on the offensive.⁴⁹

Darkness is viewed as an active and intelligent force that deliberately tries to obscure its presence while simultaneously drawing one ever further into obfuscation and sin.

Viewing the Christian life as a responsibility to love your believing community (church family) will keep you from sinning. It is a practical focus for our thoughts, actions, and emotions that will keep us engaged in divine communion and enablement.

Conclusion

John has argued that *agape* love expressed from one person to another reveals that the person is in fellowship with God and fellowship has resulted in God acting in that person. Not only this, failure to love another believer results in sin and a loss of intimacy with God.

The practice of loving other believers *keeps the believer from falling into sin*, for the practice of love is divinely authored and motivated—one cannot sin and love. When believers do not love they move away from intimacy with God. When believers love, they move toward greater intimacy with God.

The absence of sin leads to the experience of love between believers. God's love in His people promotes holiness. In addition to this, the passage clarifies that a failure to love another believer is a step away from intimacy with God. Love for God

⁴⁹ Akin, *1,2,3 John*, 100.

grows as love for believers grows. Failing to move in love toward believers demonstrates movement away from intimacy with God.

Discuss the relationship between the following characteristics and love:

- Defensiveness
- Dishonesty
- Disengagement
- Isolation
- Distraction
- Numbness

Practices

- Memorize 1 John 2:7-11
- Continue journaling
- Screen time commitments (to be shared with the group)
- Pause once a day
- 15 minutes of stillness prior to screen engagement in the AM.
- Express love, as we have been defining it, to each person in the group this week.

This will require forethought, planning, and time. As you contemplate this activity, follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in your expressions of love.

Week Five: Love & Hate

Check In

- How are journaling and stillness going?
- Did you memorize your verses?
- What was the most challenging aspect of demonstrating love to the members of the group?
- What was most significant about the demonstration of love activity?
- How are you doing? (answer according to the Life-Death Spectrum)
- Pray for the person to your right.

¹² We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous.

¹³ Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. ¹⁴ We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵ Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. ¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? 1 John 3:12-17

Summary

I got a random phone call in the summer between my first and second year of seminary. The man on the other end of the line had a strange accent and an even stranger

question. “Do you want to be mentored by me, five hours a week?” I didn’t recognize the number and certainly not the voice. But then he told me that he worked for a ministry called Common Grace, and I remembered that a friend of mine had been in that program a year before. He asked if I knew about the ministry—I thought it was a scholarship program for seminary students (that’s what my friend had told me).

He corrected me, “No, we are not a scholarship program, we are a mentoring program. Would you like to be mentored?” Well, as my dad had died a few years before, I knew I was in need of guidance, so I agreed to it. He told me he thought he sensed the finger of God in our conversation and that he would be in prayer about it and then he hung up.

A week or two later, he called again. Martin Hironaga had felt that I was someone God wanted in his mentoring program. My first week of seminary, I went to the first meeting. I was one of ten people. We sat in chairs in a room dimly lit with rainwater ambiance music playing for ten minutes—no talking, just silence and the sound of rain. After that Martin introduced himself to us, chatted with us, and explained how the five hours of mentoring would be spent each week, and then he invited us to eat dinner that he and his staff had prepared.

At the end of the night, Martin said, “One last thing.” I have gone down to the seminary and paid the tuition for each of you, books and fees. The money is yours, come back if you wish, but you are not required.”

Not one person dropped out.

Love, abundant and free, freely and costly given was too beautiful to walk away from. Martin loved the people in the program, even me. He showed me God’s love.

I had been so blinded by Satan up to that point in my life that I had a hard time believing that God or anyone else loved me or even that I was lovable in the first place.

The experience of that mentoring program, with the time and money invested, did more to impact my life than any seminary class ever did. I almost wonder if God had me at seminary so I could go through that program. Martin loved me with God's love, and his expression of love for me was an expression of his love for God.

Our passage for study in this lesson proves the point that loving other believers is demonstrating love for God, while failing to love believers proves that one doesn't love God.

In our text John is going to place hatred as the antithesis of love, as well as equate hatred with murder, using the example of Cain and Abel. What is most significant for our study is that John gives a practical example of what love for believers looks like. In giving this example, he is also defining what the lack of love (and thus hatred) looks like.

An exegesis of 1 John 3:12-17 shows that practical demonstrations of love for believers are practical demonstrations of love for God. In this passage John argues that love within the body of believers is a demonstration of love for God. For an individual to fail to express love for a believer is for that individual to fail to abide in relationship with God. John capitalizes on the gravity of hatred, equating it to murder, and murder is completely contradictory to the character of God.

Explanation of the Text

Cain serves as John's example of what a lack of love looks like. A brief review of the Genesis account of Cain and Abel adds color to John's usage and is necessary as

this is the only direct Old Testament reference in this letter. Cain and Abel both came “in the course of time” to offer sacrifices to Yahweh. Both brothers were participating in the worship of God. Apparently, God had revealed to Adam and Eve something of a sacrificial system prior to Mount Sinai, and the brothers were participating in this system. Sacrificing to God, an act of worship, is the foundation of the first homicide. God was pleased with both Abel and his offering, but was displeased with both Cain and his offering. The displeasure of God was motivation enough for Cain to murder his brother. Allen writes, “Both were brothers with the same parents. Both brought sacrifices to God. Both sought to worship God. The problem was that Cain’s sacrifice was apparently contrary to God’s specific rules for the kind of sacrifice he should have brought.”⁵⁰

The reader must note that the Cain and Abel account does not occur in the absence of God, or in some way as an activity far separated from Him. Rather, God is intimately involved with Cain specifically through the whole circumstance.⁵¹ Not only is an act of worship the foundation of the narrative, but God speaks to Cain to warn him of the hatred in his heart. “And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.”⁵² The personification of sin in this passage must be recognized. K. A. Matthews captures the importance of this well,

⁵⁰ Allen, *1,2,3 John*, 152.

⁵¹ I am not here arguing that Cain was a believer, nor do I believe that John wants the reader to draw that conclusion. However, John is using the Cain and Abel account to illustrate intimacy. Just because someone is “in the family” does not mean that person is carrying out God’s will, or in fact rightly bears that title. There will be many who claim to be in the family of God who are not, and their deeds will demonstrate their true loyalty. There will also be those who are in the family whose deeds at times, are not of God. The Apostle Peter is a suitable illustration of this on two accounts (Matt 16:23, Gal 2:11). Though John clearly distinguishes those who are in the faith and those who are not in this letter, that is not the point of this passage. This passage is about the importance of practicing love for the brothers, and the evil of not practicing love for the brothers.

⁵² Gen 4:7.

The REB thus reads, ‘Sin is a demon crouching at the door.’ If there is an allusion to the door demon, then the narrative is personifying sin as a demonic spirit ready to pounce on Cain once he opens the ‘door’ of opportunity. This may well correspond with the ‘seed’ of the serpent in 3:15, which will do battle with the ‘seed’ of the woman Eve. The imagery is effectively the same and the message clear: sin can be stirred up by wrong choices.⁵³

God expects Cain to overcome the evil he is facing, and that evil is personified, with Satan as at least the indirect reference.

Discussion Question

- How do demonic forces oppose your ability to express and receive love?

For John’s purposes, Cain’s story is directly applicable. There is the intimacy of brothers in a family. There is also the setting of relationship with God—in Cain it was an offering that aroused his hatred, while John’s opponents seem to be identifying disregard of believers as an acceptable way to treat believers while in relationship with God. John also draws application from the story. Cain murdered his brother because his brother’s righteous deeds revealed his own unrighteousness.

The jealousy of Cain, which was provoked by Abel’s righteousness, is a useful image for John, particularly the motive behind the murder of Abel. Stott writes, “Jealousy-hatred-murder is a natural and terrible sequence.”⁵⁴ Jesus has much to say on these topics, which Boice brings to light, drawing on Matthew 5:21, 22, and Mark 7:21-

⁵³ K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 1A: 270-271.

⁵⁴ Stott, *The Letters of John*, 144.

23, when he writes, “Consequently a person is guilty before God for heart attitudes as much as for the outward, visible actions that flow from his sin. By God’s definition hatred is as much murder as the unlawful taking of another’s life.”⁵⁵

John has just taken the lack of love for a believer (see verse 11) and presented murder as the other option.⁵⁶

Discussion Question

- How did John intend this dichotomy to be treated by the readers of his letter?

The hatred of the world should be expected in light of the fact that righteous behavior causes jealousy, hatred and murder. John affirms this—do not be surprised by the hatred of the world.

John’s next move is to explain what love for the brothers demonstrates, namely the move from the realm of death to the realm of life. Derickson writes, “John states that a means for believers to assure themselves of their salvation using the contrast of two spheres: life and death.”⁵⁷ John’s inclusive language, “We know that we have passed...” no doubt refers to all believers, John included. The past tense of the verb is referring to the moment of salvation. Marshall writes, “He is implicitly asserting that once his readers were in a state of death, from which they have not been transferred to life. John never

⁵⁵ Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 114.

⁵⁶ Based on personal assurance of salvation, one might well think that the murder mentioned here is not personally possible. Such a conviction is not merited. Lack of love and hatred are the options in the text, there is no third option. At the very least the conviction of lack of love, if and when it occurs, should be significant and alarming.

⁵⁷ Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 344.

suggests that some people are by nature endowed with spiritual life; on the contrary, a process of spiritual birth is necessary.”⁵⁸

The second half of verse 14 evokes an interpretive question. What does the phrase, “whoever does not love abides in death” mean? Marshall represents one argument well when he writes, “We find the basis in a saying in the Gospel: ‘I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life’ (John 5:24). It follows that the converse is true: the person who does not show evidence of loving his brothers is still in the realm of darkness and death.”⁵⁹ This argument gains support from the tense of the verb.⁶⁰ The present tense leads some to conclude that the person in question has never experienced new birth.⁶¹ In contrast, Derickson writes, “So abiding in death is parallel to walking in darkness in Chapter 1. For the unregenerate, it is an absolute separation from God’s presence. For the regenerate, it is the experience of social separation from God, a breakdown in fellowship without a loss of family membership.”⁶²

The effect of Derickson’s view is that even a believer may fail to love, but when he does, he is out of fellowship with God.⁶³

⁵⁸ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 190.

⁵⁹ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 191.

⁶⁰ Smalley writes, “Once more the present tense of the verb μένει [menei] indicates a continuous state of spiritual death on the part of the person (heretical or unbelieving) who refuses to love.” Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 190.

⁶¹ Akin writes, writing, “On the other hand, the absence of Christian love indicates that one has not passed into the state of spiritual life but remains (menei) in the realm of spiritual death. They walk in the darkness, not in the light. This state of spiritual death is one into which a person is born and continues to exist if regeneration does not occur (cf. Eph 2:1).” Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 157.

⁶² Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 348.

⁶³ He concludes, “Strecker (112) describes this last statement as antithetical to the first portion of the verse. Rather than saying they are dead, John again uses μένω [men'-o] to describe their experience (113). He sees this as a stronger term than εἶσθι, and notes that John used μένω [men'-o] similarly in 3:9 to

Discussion Question

- What has abiding in death has looked like in your life?
- What are the practical characteristics of death?
- What does it feel like?

This sense of abiding carries through to verse 15, where John clearly restates the reality of a “believer” who does not love fellow believers. Here John equates hatred with murder and murder as evidence that one does not have eternal life abiding in him. There is nothing new in this statement, but rather a summarizing of the argument that John has been making in the previous verses, and is also referring to common traditions known at the time, those of Cain and Abel as well as institution of the death penalty in Genesis 9.⁶⁴

John is saying that “eternal life,” either in the person of Christ or as a personification of the quality of life, is not having an influence in the believer’s life.”⁶⁵ The practical experience of believers confirms this. Love is the result of fellowship with God. Hatred is a demonstration of a broken relationship with God.⁶⁶

describe God’s seed ‘abiding’ in the believer rather than just ‘being’ in him. Thus they are experiencing death as a ‘continuing existence.’” Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 349.

⁶⁴ Strecker writes, “In this verse, however, the general term for ‘murderer’ is deliberately chosen; it recalls the Noachic law (Gen 9:6: ‘whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed’). The equation of hatred with murder derives from a broad ethical tradition.” Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 113.

⁶⁵ Derickson continues, “Eternal life motivates no one toward hatred, but rather toward love. Here as in other places with John, μένω [men'-o] is a term describing influence more than presence. Pentecost states John’s point well: “John is not saying that a saved man cannot hate. He is not saying even that a saved man cannot kill, because he can and does. What John is saying is that no man who is controlled by the new life of Christ can hate....One can be saved and hate, but one cannot be living by the power of the new life of Christ and hate at the same time.” Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 350-351.

⁶⁶ John will go on to describe hatred as something as seemingly mild as indifference in chapter

John uses the selfless love of Jesus as the example of love that believers are to express to one another.⁶⁷ Akin states the nuance well when he writes, “Although the preposition *huper* (‘for’) is often used to refer to the substitutionary nature of the atonement (cf. John 11:50; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13), John’s primary concern is to stress the exemplary aspect of Christ’s sacrifice. As Hiebert explains: ‘Since one’s life is an individual’s most precious possession, Christ’s willingness to lay down that life on behalf of others constituted the greatest possible expression of love.’”⁶⁸ The knowledge that believers have of love is based on Jesus’ sacrifice and grown through diligent effort.⁶⁹ Any encounter with Jesus is based on His sacrifice on the cross, the most significant demonstration of love in the human story.

The example of Jesus is to motivate believers to follow in His footsteps. John states, “we ought to lay down our life for the brothers.” Stott states, “By the sacrifice of Christ is not just a revelation of love to be admired; it is an example to copy. We ought (i.e., we should be willing) to lay down our lives for our brothers; otherwise our profession to love them is an empty boast.”⁷⁰ This statement adds to the definition of love to which John refers throughout the letter. The love that believers have experienced is of Jesus

4. Hatred, anger in the heart, is murder. This was characterized by Jesus as simply thinking the phrase, “you idiot” (Matt 5:22). Such thinking is possible for believers, but condemned by Jesus. It is an unfortunate reality throughout history that Christians have persecuted Christians to murderous effect. Doctrinal differences have been the excuse to for Christians to torture and murder Christians (Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish, Anabaptists, etc.).

⁶⁷ Kruse explains, “The readers are people who know what love is because they know that Jesus Christ laid down his life for them. The sort of love exemplified in Christ’s death is love which expends itself in the interests of others.” Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 137.

⁶⁸ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 158–159.

⁶⁹ Akin writes, “The verb ‘we know’ (egnokamen) refers to a knowledge that has been gained through diligent contemplation. It is an acquired understanding. The perfect tense emphasizes a historical encounter with Christ with ongoing results that affect one’s present life.” Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 158.

⁷⁰ Stott, *The Letters of John*, 147.

dying in their place (substitutionary atonement), and that example is what believers are supposed to follow. Believers follow this example by laying down their lives for each other. This sacrifice by believers for each other does not atone for sin or in any way mitigate the beloved's relationship with God. That is not the example to which John refers. It is instead the sacrificial nature of Christ's death. Strecker states, "Those who are touched by the love of God may not withdraw from their obligation to make the love they themselves have experienced a reality for others. Such a self-sacrifice is owed first of all to the brothers and sisters, and thus is an intracommunity phenomenon."⁷¹

Discussion Question

- Does love have to be costly? Why or why not?

Verse 17 is where all the theology John has been developing comes to direct application. In contrast to exemplifying the love of Jesus advocated in verse 16, John begins verse 17 with a contrasting preposition, *δέ*. The contrast to the sacrificial love of Jesus is the stinginess of one who has the world's goods and does not share them with those in need. Stott writes about the brother with worldly goods, "...he is in debt [to the one in need]."⁷² Failure to meet the need of his brother is an indication that the love of God is not abiding in him.⁷³

⁷¹ Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 115.

⁷² Stott, *The Letters of John*, 147.

⁷³ Smalley summarizes the argument well, "Anyone who (a) has material possessions, (b) takes note of a needy person, (c) and then deliberately draws back from offering assistance, cannot be said to possess the love of God." Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 195.

John moves his application from a moment of fatal sacrifice to a mode of generous living.

But the level of generous living should be very sacrificial.⁷⁴ John asks a rhetorical question regarding the brother who closes his heart to another brother. The most significant issue of his question is what “the love of God” means. John’s question is simply this: How can God’s love be in the one who refuses generosity to his brother?

John’s question is expecting a negative answer, in other words, John is stating that the experience of God’s love is not being enjoyed by the one who refuses to help a brother in need. The positive of this assertion is that God’s love, as the governing authority in the believer, must overflow in its expression to other believers.⁷⁵ John’s point is simply this, that if a believer is abiding in fellowship with God, God’s own love will flow through that believer to other believers, because that is the very heart of God. God is love (1 John 4:8), and to walk with God is to love other believers.

Conclusion

John has shown that hatred and murder are antithetical to God’s presence. More than that, the world embodies hatred for God’s people, and yet, God’s people embody His love. To fail to love is to fail to be in fellowship with God. But to love by living generously is to embody the love of God, to experience it and express it.

⁷⁴ Allen writes, “First, he speaks of having ‘the world’s goods.’ The word in Greek is *bios*, and conveys the meaning of ‘livelihood.’ John does not describe someone here who is rich in this world’s goods, but the average, ordinary person who has the basics of livelihood at his disposal and could help someone in need.” Allen, *1,2,3 John*, 157.

⁷⁵ “For just as the believer is called to abide in God through Christ (2:24), and God remains in him (4:13) so the divine love itself should ‘dwell’ in and flow from the genuine disciple of Jesus.” Malley, *1,2,3 John*, 198.

Further, loving others is an expression of loving God. Believers love other believers not because of who the beloved is, but because of what God has done in the life of the lover. One step of inference from the text proves the thesis of this chapter. John elsewhere defined love for God as obedience (John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments”).⁷⁶

If obedience to Jesus is loving him, and obedience as defined here in 1 John is abiding in and expressing the love of God to another believer, then loving other believers is loving God with God’s love.

Discussion Question

- As you might be figuring out, love is supposed to be a lifestyle, and it will require sacrifice at times. What priority should we place of practically loving our family of believers?

Practices

- Continue:
 - Journaling
 - 15 minutes of silence in the am.
 - Pauses
 - Screen time commitments
- Memorize 1 John 4:9-11
- Write your story of love

⁷⁶ John 14:15.

- No more than one page in length (can be bullet points, must be chronological).
- Note experiences where you felt loved (positive).
- Note experiences where you felt the lack of love (negative).
- A one sentence/paragraph of your conclusions from your experiences of love.
- Share it with the group in the next 72 hours.
- Read and pray through the stories of the rest of the group. Listen to their stories and see them in it. Allow the Holy Spirit to give you insight into their wounds and strengths. Come prepared to speak into each one's life next time we meet.

Week 6: The Source of Love

Check In

- How are you doing? (Answer according to the Life-Death Spectrum)
- How did the Scripture memory go?
- Was there anything that you left off of your love story that you need to add?

- Prayer—pray for the person to your right.

1 John 4:9-12

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

Introduction

Someone once said that loved people love people, and hurt people hurt people. This proverb is generally true, but it misses a bit of the nuance of the way that love works. People who believe they have not been loved, regardless of the truth of that belief, do not love people. The Bible says that God loves everyone (John 3:16), and yet one cannot live for too long without encountering serious failures in the arena of love. Because of the sin nature, the broken world and the prince of the air, the lack of love is not only common, but it is the default mode of all humanity.

If everyone encounters serious failures in the arena of love, then it would seem that the responsible thing to do would be to organize life around experiencing love. Even if one has never stated this directly, practically speaking it is far easier to fall into this mode of relationship. If loved people love people and God calls us to love people, then shouldn't we do our best to surround ourselves with people who love us? Such thinking runs completely contrary to the practice of Jesus. He calls us to love the unlovable. This brings us back to the original proverb, if loved people love people, but people generally don't love well—how are we to love well?

John recognizes that this is a problem, one that is resolved in the beauty of God's love and His grace. God has always loved people, but convincing people that God does not love them, and then providing painful experiences as proof of that lack of love is one of Satan's primary methods to destroy a believer's relationship with God. John's resolution to the issue is to inform believers that God's love has always been on them, even if they haven't seen it from time to time, and then to instruct them to love each other so that the love of God is hard to ignore. Loved people, love people, so Jesus loved us, and calls us to reflect His love to all around us.

An exegesis of 1 John 4:9-12 shows that believers fill up the expression of God's love for His children by expressing His love to each other. In this passage John draws to a conclusion his argument about the inseparable tie between love for "brothers" and love for God. The tie between loving God and loving the brothers will be so tight that it cannot be separated—one cannot love the brothers without loving God, and one cannot love God without loving the brothers. To love God is to love the brothers, and to love the brothers is to love God.

Explanation of the Text

In verses 9-10, John argues that God demonstrated His love for people by sending Jesus to die for their sins, so that people could enjoy eternal life. This love of God was not precipitated by meritorious action on the part of people, but rather when people were in the state of justly deserving God's wrath. God is always the Initiator, Author, and Sustainer of love.⁷⁷

Verse 11 applies the example of God's love as a motivating factor and example of the love. Even though God's love was extended through Jesus to an unmeriting audience, that love should not stop there but continue to flow to others.⁷⁸ Boice makes the amazing and selfless nature of God's love explicit, "Who are those for whom Christ died? Not lovely people by God's reckoning, but sinners, those who have rebelled against God and hated Him. Indeed, they were those who would crucify His Son out of hatred for Him, and such are we all."⁷⁹ The nature of love between believers that John is referencing is encapsulated in the first word of verse 11, "beloved." This is the adjective form of the noun, *agape*. This sort of love, as has been mentioned earlier, is selfless and self-sacrificing, and is embodied by Jesus.

⁷⁷ Akin writes, "Further, God's love is primary, not ours. The death of Christ is extolled, not the birth. John, in concluding the verse with the phrase 'our sin' (*tōn hamartiōn hēmōn*), is keenly aware of his own need as well as ours for this propitiatory act. Our act was to sin. God's was to love and send." Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 180.

⁷⁸ Kruse agrees, "The author is not giving a lesson about the love of God for its own sake, but to show that God's love for us must cause us to love one another." Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 161.

⁷⁹ Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 142.

The result of embodying the love of God is what John addresses next. Concerning verse 12, Boice writes, “The reply of this verse is almost breathtaking, for it is John’s clear statement that although God cannot be seen in Himself, He can be seen in those in whom He abides and in whom His love is perfected.”⁸⁰ Boice emphasizes the demonstration in the actions of the lover, not the reception of love by the beloved. His point is that when a believer loves, God’s love is being seen or *revealed*.

Discussion Questions

- In the places you have been loved, have you received that love as coming from God Himself? If not, why not?
- Does viewing an experience of love in this way put your story in a different perspective?

Sight is one of the most important themes in all of John’s writings. Jesus is not only the revelation of the Father, but also brings light to all men.⁸¹ Regarding the indwelling of God evidenced by love for the brothers, John uses *menō*, the same word for remain as has been commented on earlier.

Rather than remain in God, John says God is remaining, or abiding in the believer who loves. This indwelling of God, evidenced by love, has dramatic consequences. The phrase “His love is perfected in us” refers to the completion of the

⁸⁰ Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 143.

⁸¹ Kruse summarizes John’s Gospel on this topic: The invisibility of God is an important theme in the Fourth Gospel (“No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known” [John 1:18]; “And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form” [John 5:37]; “No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father” [John 6:46]). The author’s statement about the invisibility of God reproduces the statement found in John 1:18, with only minor variations. The author’s point, then, is that while no one can claim to have seen God (apart from God’s one and only Son) believers who love one another demonstrate that the unseen God lives in them. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 161-162.

love of God.⁸² Stott makes this explicit when he writes:

It would be hard to exaggerate the greatness of this conception. It is so daring that many commentators have been reluctant to accept it and have suggested that the genitive in His love is not subjective (“God’s love”) but objective (our love for God; cf. 2:5) or definitive (“Godlike love”). But the whole paragraph is concerned with God’s love and we must not stagger at the majesty of this conclusion. God’s love, which originates in Himself (7-8) and was manifested in His Son (9-10), is made complete in His people (12). It is “brought to perfection within us” (NEB). God’s love for us is perfected only when it is reproduced in us or (as it may mean) “among us” in the Christian fellowship.⁸³

That we have a role in completing the love of God is an earth-shattering claim, and it is followed by another—John is here writing that by loving God’s people, we love Him.⁸⁴

Discussion Questions

- If loving God’s people means loving Him, is it fair to look at our love for God’s people as a measure of our love for God?
- How does your view of people change in light of this presentation of loving God?
- How does the responsibility to love rank in our priorities in relationship to God?
- Does spending time with God’s people equal spending time with God? Why or why not?

We should not hesitate to describe love for a fellow believer as love for God.

What must be understood in this statement is a clear orthodox understanding of God.

⁸² 1 John 4:12.

⁸³ Stott, *The Letters of John*, 167.

⁸⁴ Smalley unpacks that demonstration further by stating, “Before he makes this point, however, the writer explains the form of the love command in v 11 (we are to love others, not God, in response to the divine love). For the fact is that, ‘no one has ever seen God,’ and by loving other people we are indeed loving him.” Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 243-244.

Loving others is a direct demonstration of love for God. To love others is to love God.

Filling up the love of God deserves special note. Derickson is helpful on this point, “God’s love in us attains its goal only as we exercise it within the body of Christ toward fellow believers. ‘The manifestation of active love by men witnesses to two facts: (1) the abiding of God in them, and (2) the presence of divine love in them in its most complete form. There is both the reality of fellowship and the effectiveness of fellowship’ (Wescott, 151).”⁸⁵ To fill up the love of God is to abide with Him, allowing His love for others to flow through you into action for them. “Perfected” love does not mean without fault, it simply means attaining to its goal, or completed.

When we love others with God’s love, their experience of His love is completed. Wielding the love of God in this manner forges change in the lives of those around us in the most dramatic ways imaginable.

Conclusion

To be loved—to know it, see it, experience it, and enjoy it is one of the primary longings of every human being. Fortunes are made and lost in the pursuit of love, lives are rendered hopeless by the lack of love, or rendered most blessed by the possession of it. Every person you have ever met is hungry for love—not the demanding “love” that the world offers (be acceptable or likable and I will “love” you) but the real selfless love of God demonstrated by Jesus. To know such love is to be changed. To offer such love is to change others, and it is the path that changes the world.

⁸⁵ Derickson, *1, 2 & 3 John*, 447.

Practices

Continue:

- Journaling
- Pause
- Silence
- Screen time commitments.

Rewrite your story of love, but this time write it from the perspective of God expressing His love for you, and Satan, the world, and the flesh doing its best to keep you from seeing the love of God. Write it again as a bullet point list on one page, but each event recorded should have an account of how you received God's love or were blinded to it. Send this out to the rest of the group within the next 72 hours.

Pray and read through each persons' love stories. Write notes on what you think God wants that person to hear from you. Prepare to speak to each one when the group gathers next week.

Week Seven: Listening

Check In

- How are you doing? (Answer according to the Life-Death Spectrum)
- Did you get your verses memorized?
- Pray for the person to your right.

Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. 1 John 3:18

If it hasn't yet been clear, throughout the letter of 1 John, John is relentlessly calling out for demonstrations of love. Don't just talk about love, do it. You have participated in this by demonstrating your love for one another, but today the focus is on a different sort of demonstration. John says that love is to be in deed and in truth.

Loving in truth may be even harder than loving in deeds. Loving in truth requires honesty and humility on both parts. When you love in truth, sometimes you will have hard things to say to those you love. Solomon refers to this as the faithful wounds of a friend (Proverbs 27:6). Often you will simply have an honest outside perspective that has been totally missed. Either way, the deeds of love must be bathed in truth. And truth requires being present to someone's story.

Loving in truth means that you spend the time and energy to really see someone from God's perspective so that you can really love them. Though God does not change, how His love is demonstrated does change. A person in sin might need strong rebuke, but they might also need to be gently taught that what they are doing is wrong.

How you respond to someone depends on where they are—that takes thought, prayer and time.

In a distracted, noisy, and busy world, one of the things that has gotten lost is the ability to be heard. Listening to someone is one of the most important demonstrations of love. Good listening requires active feedback and follow up—you can't just sit there and expect someone to keep talking and call that listening. Real listening is real conversation and it requires clarifying and thoughtful questions as well as loving engagement.

This past week you received the second installment of each person's love story. The first story is the first-hand account, and the second is a best guess at where God was throughout their life. Writing those stories in honesty is humbling. Today is the time for feedback and engagement.

Starting with the person to the left of the leader, take turns speaking to that person.

Speak to the wounds that you see.

Speak to the strengths that you see.

Tell them God's thoughts of them in light of their story—with a verse if you have one.

Tell them things that you see that are unique to them.

After each person has been spoken to, go around the group with each one praying for the one who was spoken to.

While being spoken to:

Don't defend yourself, or try to give explanations or excuses, just listen.

Unless you asked for clarifying information, stay silent.

After the group has prayed for the leader, the session is over. Be gentle to your souls today. If you have done the practices the last few weeks in honesty and humility, you will probably feel exposed, insecure, and perhaps even a little scared. Satan likes to attack in moments like that. Stand firm and guard your soul today.

Practices

Continue:

- Screen time commitments
- Pauses
- Silence
- Journaling
- Memorize 1 John 4:19-21
- Read Judges 13-17 and prepare to answer the following questions:
 - What was missing from Samson's life?
 - What could have changed so that his life wouldn't be a tragedy?
 - What parallels do you see between the life of Samson and the life that our culture advocates for men?

Week 8: Love as a Metric

Check In

- How are you doing? (Answer according to the Life-Death Spectrum)
- What answers did you come with after reading Samson's story?
- He was strong, but he didn't have friends.
- He was blessed by God, but ham-strung by lust.
- He had a mighty calling as a hero, but squandered it by his affection for wicked people and wicked practices.
- Pray for the person to your right.

13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 16 So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. 17 By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for 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. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his

Summary

Have you ever heard someone say something like, “I love you, but...” It is a claim to have love for you followed up usually by something that is not very loving. The way the world seems to treat love could well be summed up by that statement—“I love you but, only if you meet my standards for a lovable person.” It’s not just unbelievers who express love like that, sometimes believers behave in the same manner.

We have covered the ideas of loving with God’s love, but in the closing section of chapter 4 John enlarges this point. He makes the startling claim that believers can actually share God’s character. God is so generous that He shares His attributes with His people. This experience, as you might have guessed, is only available for the believer who is abiding with God. And the experience of abiding, resulting in demonstrating the character of God to those around you through supernatural love, should be visible to all. John goes so far as to make the argument that believers should be able to judge whether or not other believers are abiding with God based on their visible demonstrations of love.

The concluding arguments of John 4 make the case that love for God is demonstrated by actions toward believers and removes fear. In addition to this, loving other believers is solidified as a path to loving God and growing in that love for God. As believers love, God’s own character becomes their character. They demonstrate Him.

Verses 13-15 give three other evidences of the remaining (*menō*) in God. Verse 13 claims first that the abiding relationship with God is reciprocal. The believer who abides in God has God abiding in him. There is no one-sidedness to that relationship.

The evidence of remaining in Him is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In verse 14 a second evidence for the same fact is given—those who have seen and give testimony to the Father’s sending of Jesus as the Savior of the world are those who are remaining with God. In verse 15, the final evidence of indwelling is the confession of Jesus’ deity. The Spirit’s presence, the Father’s sending, and confession of the Son’s identity form a three-legged proof of indwelling.

Verse 16 advances John’s argument to the practical conclusion of what abiding in God looks like. Kruse gives a helpful explanation of the knowing and believing language. “The expression ‘know and rely on’ (*egnōkamen kai pepisteukamen*) appears to be a hendiadys, that is, the use of two words to express essentially one idea.”¹ To know God’s love is to find it reliable. What cannot be divorced from this concept is that John is talking about the practical experience of the love of God based on what Jesus did at the cross.² Believers give the real, practical, experienced love of God when they walk with God, loving Him and others.³ Thus, the love of God is not mere doctrine or theory, it is a lived experience of God’s active presence through the Holy Spirit’s work. Abiding in God results in the real, lived experience of God’s love.

Discussion Questions

- Does “abiding” always result in the feeling of God’s love?

¹ Kruse, *The letters of John*, 165.

² Marshall points out, “The believer is sure of his faith because he has personally experienced the love of God. He has come to know and also to put his trust in it.” Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 221.

³ Such an interpretation is followed by Derickson who states, “Thus God’s love is ‘expressed in believers.’ He [Harris] points to 3:15 and 5:10 where *ἔχω* [*echo*] is used with *ἐν* [*en*] ‘which literally refer to something ‘in’ someone.” Derickson, *1, 2 & 3 John*, 458-459.

- If God loves everyone, what is different for the one who abides?

In the conclusion of verse 16 John returns to a theme he has previously stated in verse 8, God is love. Smalley, relating back to verse 8 sees this as an affirmation of the divine essence, “love as the essence of the divine nature.”⁴ The force of this statement is that the indwelling presence of God is of such quality as to share in a divine characteristic. Smalley continues, “It shows us not only that God loves us, but also that he *is* love. John picks up that thought from v 8, and adds to it the idea of mutual indwelling (the believer in God, and God in the believer).”⁵

John returns to a favored verb, *menō*, in the qualifications that lead to the love of God being expressed in the believer. A believer must be walking in continued submission to God to enjoy and express God’s love.⁶ The fact that experiencing and expressing the love of God depend on remaining in Him must not be overlooked. While the expression of *agape* love is required of all believers, a full and faithful expression of this love may be expected of those who have faithfully walked closely with God.⁷

⁴ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 256.

⁵ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 256.

⁶ Akin comments helpfully summarize this point. “It must be stated that the previous characteristics and qualifications are still required. Speaking of the love of God, as many often do, is not enough. The confession of the incarnate Christ and acknowledgment of his atonement and Lordship are necessary. Without this combination, this mutual abiding is not possible. The fact that the word ‘abide’ (*menō*) occurs three times in the Greek text underscores this point.” Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 185.

⁷ Smalley follows the point well, “‘Living in love’ means remaining in union with God and also expressing this relationship in practical love for others. In these terms Christian experience is neither subjective nor traditional. For the writer (perhaps in opposition to those heretically-inclined members of his congregation who undervalued love of any kind) places equal emphasis on ‘love to God, which is the heart of religion, and love to man, which is the foundation of morality’ (Dodd, 118; see 116–18) (*italics mine*).” Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 256.

Discussion Question

- Practically speaking, what does walking with God in a way that allows His love to flow through you look like? Is this possible or even realistic?

Verse 16 ties together the love of God and the love of believers so that one cannot in any way claim to know God or have fellowship with Him who does not have genuine love for believers. John has elevated the love of believers to the same significance of loving God.

In verse 17, John returns to a theme of confidence in the face of judgment. Practicing love, which requires the indwelling of God as well as dwelling in Him, brings us confidence. The reason for this confidence is that believers who even now dwell in God are embodying Him on earth. This is not to say believers are perfect, but that we are becoming in time what we will be fully in eternity.⁸

Discussion Question

- Peter says that believers become partakers of the divine nature, meaning we participate in God's nature.⁹ Using the context of 1 John 4, and 2 Peter 1, what is participating in the divine nature, and how does one do it?

⁸ Derickson handles the difficult question of the way in which we resemble Jesus now when he writes, "We probably have here another example of that portrayal of the 'eschatological reality' of the Christian life which we found particularly in 3:6, 9; John is stating the characteristic which ought to be found in every true Christian, namely that he is like Jesus, but this is not incompatible with his urging his readers to let the ideal become a reality. Were it not so, our grounds for confidence might seem very slender and fitful." Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 223-224.

⁹ 2 Peter 1:3-4 "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, **4**by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine

Verse 18 builds on the topic of confidence by splitting it up into a fear/love dichotomy. The fear John mentions is fear of eternal condemnation in hell. Love for God casts out all fear of eternal damnation.¹⁰ If one is a believer and still lives in fear of hell, then God's love has not been perfected in that person—they are not walking in fellowship with God.¹¹ Having applied the eschatological reality to abiding in God's love, John moves on to summarize the importance of love in the life of the believer in verses 19-21.

John reminded his readers that it was not fear that led them to respond to God, but love; likewise, it is not fear that grants confidence in the day of judgment, but love. The main instrument God uses to bring us back to a true relationship of love is not fear of His judgment but the fact of His love.¹²

The conclusion of the chapter turns to a very helpful and specific criteria for determining if one is truly motivated by love for God or not, truly responding to God's initiatory love or not. Smalley writes, "John returns to his attack on the heretical members and ex-members of his community; but this time his concern is not so much with their doctrinal beliefs (cf. 4:1–3, 6) as with their ethical behavior."¹³ John's teaching is

nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire."

¹⁰ Kruse writes, "Love for God and fear of God cannot coexist (cf. Rom 8:15). The type of fear the author is speaking about is revealed in 4:18b when the author explains why there is no fear in love: because fear has to do with punishment. The type of fear meant here is fear of punishment (emphasis his)." Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 168.

¹¹ Kruse continues, "When people fear God's punishment, it is a sign that they have not yet been perfected in love: The one who fears is not made perfect in love. Perfection in love here involves a love for God which is based upon our sense of God's love for us, and this love relationship is what removes our fear as we face the day of judgement(emphasis his)." Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 168–169.

¹² Marshall writes, "We love because he first loved us. Our love for God is based on God's prior love for us, and is thus the response of gratitude." Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 225.

¹³ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 262–263.

wonderfully practical and helpful in determining the legitimacy of the new “teachers.” John is expecting that his audience will be able to judge, distinguishing between the one who loves and the one who doesn’t.¹⁴

The point at issue is whether or not an individual is demonstrating quantifiable love for other believers. If the person in question is not demonstrating love, that person is not loving God—the claim made at the beginning of the verse (“if anyone claims to love God”) being proved false.

Discussion Question

- Can you love God and not demonstrate love for other believers?

If one is making the claim to love God, but demonstrating a lack of love for believers, that person is a liar.¹⁵ Demonstrating a lack of love is not just reserved for the situation where a Christian needs a meal or clothes. A lack of love is also demonstrated by apathy toward the needs of others—not just in emotion, but also in action.¹⁶ “Mild unconcern” is a high standard, one easy to miss amid the busy-ness of life. And yet, if the

¹⁴ Akin agrees, stating, “One may possibly claim to love God and deceive others since God cannot be seen and others are not able to prove the truth of the declaration. The visible manifestation of an individual’s love for God, however, will eventually show up in his dealings with his brothers and sisters in Christ, who indeed are very visible.” Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 187.

¹⁵ Derickson writes on the term “liar,” “This same term is used to describe the person who claims to know God while not obeying Him (2:4), who denies that Jesus is the Christ (2:22)—the first a believer, the second an antichrist. So John does not describe this person as deceived like he had the one making false claims about sin in 1:8. He is also not like the believer who has hated his own brother and has been walking in darkness, unaware of his own blindness (2:9-11). Rather, this is a statement of his character. He is not just lying. He is a liar.” Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 474.

¹⁶ Derickson is also helpful on the metric used to judge the liar, “This is the one who by nature does not love his Christian brother. He has already described this lack of love in terms of refusing to meet physical needs (3:17). Thus hating another Christian is not an emotion directed toward someone. It is what we do and can be something as ‘mild’ as unconcern.” Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 475.

love of God is in us, and being exercised through us, those who are in need will be seen and loved by us.

Love is an action and love involves feelings, but prior to either of these elements, love is a decision. It is a beautiful thing when one receives good from other believers and responds appropriately in love. But it is even more a reflection of the character of God when one sees and experiences the flaws, frustrations, and woundedness of another and responds with love. The decision to love in light of what some might say are perfectly acceptable reasons not to is a reflection of God's character.

Discussion Questions

- What does making the decision to love another believer look like?
- Is that decision more or less difficult than doing loving actions?
- How does naming/describing another person, even in your own thoughts affect the ability to love them?
- If you make the decision to love another, does the lack of loving perfectly mean you are not abiding?

John's argument moves from the lesser to the greater at the conclusion of verse 20.¹⁷ John's point is that it is more difficult to love Someone invisible than it is to love someone visible. Smalley expands on this idea, bringing into it the basis for judgment,

¹⁷ Kruse writes, "This is an a fortiori statement, arguing from the lesser to the greater. If people cannot carry out the lesser requirement (to love their fellow believers whom they have seen), they cannot carry out the greater requirement (to love God whom they have not seen). The nature of the true experience of God is such that it cannot exist without manifesting itself in love for God's people." Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 170.

“The fact that God is invisible means that a claim to love him can be neither proved nor disproved. But no deception is possible in the case of our fellow-men, since the nature of any relationship with them can be easily tested (although appearances, even among people, can still deceive!).”¹⁸ The claim to love God, if isolated from human relationships, cannot be validated. But the love of believers can be validated, and should be. It is important to remember that opening claim John is addressing, one who claims to love God. That claim, while hating fellow believers, demonstrates the character of the claimant—he is a liar. Smalley concludes, “To withhold the one is to render the other impossible. We are to love God in others, and others in him. Such is the meaning of ‘living in love’ (v 16).”¹⁹

Verse 20 reiterates the importance of love as it relates to the Christian life by drawing upon Jesus’ words, specifically those recorded in the Upper Room Discourse in the Gospel of John.²⁰ Jesus’ command to His followers, especially as recorded in the Fourth Gospel, is unavoidable. Love is the initiating cause of Christianity, and the *sine qua non* of the practice of following Jesus. Akin makes the connection wonderfully explicit, “The reason that it is impossible for the inconsistency stated in 4:20 to remain is that the command to love God and *the command to love one’s brother are two parts of*

¹⁸ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 263.

¹⁹ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 264.

²⁰ Kruse states, “Here the author picks up a major theme from the Last Supper discourse in the Fourth Gospel, where Jesus stresses that his disciples’ love for him must express itself in obedience to his command, and that his command is that they should love one another (John 13:34; 14:15; 15:12; 15:17).” Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 170.

one command. They are inseparable. In fact, the use of ‘and’ (*kai*) to begin the verse connects it with the prior verse” (emphasis mine).²¹

The inseparability of love for God and love for people must not be overlooked as one of (or perhaps the most) essential combinations of the inner relationship with God and its external demonstration.

John has shown that growing in intimacy with God requires growing in intimacy with fellow believers. Further, to grow in love for fellow believers is to grow in love for God. Pursing love for fellow believers apart from God is a futile pursuit. Growing in practical demonstrations of love and intimacy toward other believers is a demonstration, metric, and practical means to enhance one’s walk with God.

The significance of loving people as a reflection of one’s relationship with God is not made only in John’s writing. Paul wrote in Galatians 5:14, “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Jesus himself combines the same two elements in Mark 12:30-31, ““And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Conclusion

Four truth statements can be distilled from the writing above. 1) Loving believers is perfecting the love of God in us (v. 12). 2) Abiding in fellowship with God is

²¹ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 187.

abiding in His experienced and expressed love (v. 16). 3) Loving God and others is a response to God's initiatory love and indwelling. 4) The claim to love God can and should be validated in a believer's life by quantifiable efforts to meet the needs of believers in want.

What can be distilled from these four statements is this principle—believers can pursue greater intimacy with God by loving other believers. If a failure to love believers is a failure to love God, and if loving other believers is an act of loving God, and if loving God cannot be separated from loving believers, and if loving God is the great commandment, then, as Smalley stated, “We are to love God in others, and others in him. Such is the meaning of ‘living in love’ (v 16).”²² Believers can pursue an active path of loving each other as a means to spiritual growth. Such a plan will doubtless lead them to the end of their natural affections for one another and into the supernatural love of God. A statement from Smalley sums this up well, “...by loving other people we are indeed loving him.”²³

As we conclude our time together answer these questions:

- How will we continue to express love for one another?
- How will you preserve the space for love (freedom/distractions)?
- How will you grow in your love for God and others outside this group?

²² Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 264.

²³ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 243-244.

Epilogue

The world today is in need of men who are strong, engaged, and love well. Though certainly not an isolated event, the feminist redefinition of gender has required a redefinition of masculinity. While feminism has confidently contended for new ideas about what it is to be a woman, masculinity as a category or a response has yet to show up in any organized or categorical manner. The loss (in the sense of knowledge of what masculinity is or how it should be demonstrated) has resulted in male disengagement with the world. That disengagement may not have caused the birth of the internet, but it has paralleled its creation and growth.

Men understand what it is to be a healthy man (powerfully and masculinely engaged in the world) through their relationships with other men whom they respect. Though there are many attacks on masculinity in American culture today, perhaps the most devastating is isolation. To be cut off from real connection to other men is lose the primary channel through which men gain the confidence to live as healthy masculine expressions of the image of God, and this is especially true for those who have had difficult relationships with their father. The real loss of a screen addiction, pornographic or otherwise, is that it isolates a man from other men and from his own soul.

The resolution to the attack on masculinity (on your masculinity if you are a man) is to have meaningful relationships with God and with your spiritual brothers, relationships that are built both on the reception and expression of love. One of the little noted elements in the wake of the LGBTQ agenda is that male to male relationships invite tension in regard to sexuality. In a culture that is increasingly pansexual it is no longer safe to assume both parties desire a platonic friendship even between people of the

same gender. The image of the loner has become the definition of a real man. Culture claims that to have profound friends who you rely on is to be less masculine, but that claim is false and must be confronted.

The story of Samson is one of a man among men. He is a man marked by superhuman strength, lust, and loneliness. Though he was a combination of jacked weightlifter and Rambo on the run, his story lacks the account of a single friend—the Bible points out that even at his wedding he has not one groomsman. He ends his days in the temple of the ungodly—their plaything and amusement. Such is the path of today's men, however strong they think themselves if they do not commit to enter their world with the strength of God-given brotherhood. Such a path charts a new course, one where like David, they are part of a band of mighty men destroying the strongholds of evil. May you likewise forge friendships so that your name and deeds will resound in history and eternity.

These are the names of David's warriors...

2 Samuel 23:8

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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING FOLLOWERS OF JESUS AMONG THE MEN OF NAGS HEAD CHURCH IN NAGS HEAD, NORTH CAROLINA

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Based on an exegetical study of the interconnectedness of love for God and love for fellow believers in 1 John, this project is built on a small-group format that utilizes love for fellow believers as an avenue for spiritual growth. Through an eight-lesson study conducted on a weekly basis, participants engage in the command to love one another and God. This engagement involves learning about love from the text of 1 John, as well as participating in spiritual disciplines, and completing practical assignments designed to bring the theoretical idea of love into practice in real relationships with one another.

The program was run with six men (the author being one of the six), in the summer of 2021. The program was life-changing for the participants, forging friendships where there had been none, and creating community in the place of isolation. The community created continued even after the program ended, birthing a new running of the program with a separate group of men, and led by two men from the original group (the author is not one of the two).

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