

# 1 John: God is Love

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

## Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from your mouth. Make us hungry for this heavenly food, that it may nourish us today in the ways of eternal life, through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. Amen.

## Background

Great Christian leaders through the centuries have spoken of their love for John's epistles.

- Augustine: *This book is very sweet to every healthy Christian heart that savors the bread of God and it should be in the mind of God's holy church.*
- Martin Luther: *This is an outstanding epistle that can buoy up afflicted hearts.*
- John Wesley: *How plain, how full, how deep a compendium of genuine Christianity!*

In fact, the church fathers understood 1 John as a commentary on the Gospel According to John.

As Christians, we take it for granted that God is love. But did you know that there are only two times where the Bible openly declares, "God is love"? Both occurrences happen in the same book: 1 John. We need to listen to John's epistles. Love is not just one of God's many characteristics. Love is THE defining attribute of God. Love is the motivation for everything that God does—not only God's kind acts of salvation and mercy, but also God's discipline and even God's judgment that's rooted in love. Thank God for that!

But for us human beings it's a little trickier. It's been said that the two most difficult things to get right in life are LOVE and GOD. More often than not, the trouble and mess we get ourselves into comes down to getting either LOVE or GOD or BOTH wrong.

John gives us some spiritual direction:

If you want to get God right, you need to be loving in your life.

If you want to get love right in your life, you need to get God right in your life.

In Jesus, God and love live together in perfect harmony.

But in John's time, there were some that didn't like the way God revealed himself in Christ. So they made up their own versions of God or love. And the unity of God was being splintered in the community. In times of controversy, it's easy to respond with either laxity on the one hand or legalism on the other.

But John reveals to us a third way—the way of the cross. And the cross and the resurrection show us that wholeness can come out of brokenness. And it's in the light of the cross that we see that God is love.

*Let's hear now from ...*

**Scripture: 1 John 3: 1-3 (NKJV)**

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

**SERMON – 1 John: God is Love**

CEO Coach Jerry Colonna shares in his unique and moving leadership book *Reboot* about a few writing courses he took in college. One of his professors was the brilliant poet Marie Ponsot, who would talk about The Crow that loves to perch atop the author's shoulder, saying things like:

- *That's garbage. How could you write that? or*
- *Are you kidding me?!?*

It's not just writers that can have The Crow shrilly caw into the ear things like:

- *Nevermore!*
- *You're a failure.*
- *You're a fraud—a joke.*

The Crow hops to the other shoulder, cawing more lies.

- *You never really belonged.*
- *You're guilty.*
- *What's wrong with you?*
- *You're not enough.*

In response, diminutive, chain-smoking Marie would raise her tobacco-stained fingers into the air, punctuating every word:

– *Shoot. The. Darn. Crow.*

The Crow takes many forms: The Crow can be your inner-critic. The Crow can be the hurtful words of loved ones or adversaries. The Crow can be what the Scriptures call the devil—*The Accuser*.

The Apostle John helps us “*Shoot.The.Darn.Crow*” by reminding us who we are— we are God’s beloved children. We’re children of light, not darkness, who walk in the light of God’s love, treating others, treating ourselves, with loving-kindness.

The mystery and the wonder of it all is that God calls us his children:

*Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us,  
that we should be called children of God! – 1 John 3:1 (NKJV)*

It’s absolutely astonishing! This idea of God giving or bestowing his love can also be translated LAVISHED. God’s love is lavished upon us. By common grace, everyone is made in the *imago dei*—image of God. But it is by God’s amazing grace that we’re children of God. To be a child of God is to be adopted into an intimate and trusting relationship with God, where we reflect the family likeness. As God’s children, we can be assured of the Father’s love for us.

Life is good now, and it’s only getting better when Christ comes again. Because we’re God’s children, we’re promised an incredible inheritance in the life to come. And if you have something to look forward to, you can endure anything. Our future hope inspires us to be more like Christ, more Jesus-ish in our day to day lives.

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. – Matthew 5:8 (NASB)*

In other words, John is saying this:

- *Be who you are.*
- *Live up to the family name.*
- *Take on the family likeness.*
- *Jesus is the Prince of Peace,*
- *And he gives us his peace.*

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” says Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, “for they will be called children of God.” One of the ways we know that we’re children of God is that the world doesn’t recognize us as children of God. The same happened to Christ—the world didn’t recognize him as the son of God.

Although we know we’re children of God, there’s a mystery about what we’ll eventually become in heaven. Paul says, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” John also says that, “what we shall be has not yet been

revealed." It's OK to be in that place of not knowing, even if you're an apostle. It's OK to not always have the answers. But we have some clues about heaven—we will become like Christ. Our future state will be even better than our present state. We will be *with* Christ and we will be *like* Christ.

Paul says in the book of Romans that God has already planned that we'll be conformed to the likeness of his Son. Christ's destiny and our destiny are forever entwined. And the good news is that we have the privilege today to join in with God's work of making us more Jesus-ish this side of heaven. This involves becoming more spiritually mature—more childlike and less childish. More attuned to not only our rights as God's children, but our responsibilities as God's children.

JFK would have put it this way:

*Ask not what your church can do for you, but what you can do for your church.*

So if you want to look like Christ more,

- Look upon Christ more.
- Look to Christ more.
- Look up to Christ more.

*Have you noticed that over time spouses often look like one another?*

There are a number of scientific reasons for this. Couples often times eat the same foods over the years, which make us chemically more similar over time. But the major reason that spouses look similar over time is that they LOOK AT EACH OTHER over the years. When you have eye contact, you mirror the other's facial expressions. You share the same expressions with your partner. Over the years this similarly shapes the muscles and skin of the couple's face.

One of the definitions of contemplative prayer is giving Jesus, "a long loving look." Gazing into the eyes of Jesus makes us more like Jesus. The more we gaze upon God, the more we become like him. Or as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount—*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

Enter into a covenantal relationship with Christ. Spend time with him—share your life with Christ. Abide with him—dwell and linger in his presence. Commune with him. Break bread with Christ—He'll reveal himself to you. Giving Christ that long loving look, in prayer and meditation, leads to a miraculous transfiguration— where Christ is formed and fashioned in us more and more.

In the original language, John literally says that God's love has been bestowed UPON us or lavished UPON us. This is interesting, because other passages also talk about placing God's words UPON our hearts, not IN our hearts.

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There's a story about a Rabbi and a disciple discussing this very thing.

A disciple asks the Rabbi:

"Why do the Scriptures tell us to 'place these words UPON our hearts'? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words IN our hearts?"

The Rabbi answers:

"It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words IN our hearts. So, we place them ON TOP OF our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall IN."

So too, God bestows his love ON his children, Knowing that his love will also fall INTO our broken-open hearts. We'll not only fall in love, but love will fall into us, love will fall into our broken-open hearts.

Immanuel, let our hearts be open to God. Open to one another. So that God's love might be poured into the open vessels of our lives. And we in turn, might pour our lives into others, with God's love.

**Amen.**

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