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Living Into God's Love

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1 John 4:7-12 (ESV)

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. 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. 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. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

Here's the corrected transcript with appropriate punctuation, sentence breaks, and paragraph breaks:

As we head into this Christmas week, we are wrapping up our four weeks of Advent—our time of waiting, anticipating, and celebrating the gifts of God that He delivered to us through the sending of His Son, Jesus, into the world.

As the prophet Isaiah said, *Unto us a son is given, unto us a child is born*. And when this child came into the world—the Messiah, the great I Am—He came and worked among us.

And then Ephesians, chapter four, verse eight says, *When He ascended back into heaven, He gave gifts to men through His Holy Spirit*. We've been talking about those gifts and living into some of those supernatural gifts of God given to us through the work of Christ.

Of course, we've talked about the gift of a supernatural hope, an unquenchable optimism that God wants you and I to experience in our hearts, that we can be born into. The Bible describes it as a *living hope kept in heaven for us that can never perish, spoil, or fade*—a hope that can carry us through this life because it's a hope in Almighty God. And then it's a hope that can carry us on into eternity as we anticipate and look forward to all that God has prepared for those who love Him.

As a matter of fact, the Bible says, *No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind can conceive what God has prepared for those who love Him*. He literally wants us to live in a constant hope of what lies ahead.

That comes to us through the power of the Holy Spirit into our hearts as we believe. And so one of the gifts is the gift of hope—the first thing we celebrate at Advent.

Then, of course, walking in this crazy world, God has distributed to us the gift of peace. Jesus said it this way: *My peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives*. The world can't offer this kind of peace. This is a peace that transcends all understanding. Paul said it can guard our hearts and minds. And all of this is made available to you and I through Christ Jesus our Lord—the gift of this child, the supernatural hope.

We can walk in the peace that transcends all understanding. And then, of course, we can walk in and have an inexpressible joy—a joy unspeakable, full of glory. This joy, like the peace and the hope, comes to us from outside of this world. We can walk in this joy. We can live into this joy when we believe, receive, and believe what God has said to us in His Word.

Take His promises to heart—that He works all things for good, even the hard things in our life, for those of us who love Him and are called according to His purpose. He will meet every need that we have according to His riches in glory, and He's gone to prepare a place for us. He'll come back to take us to be with Him. When we have confidence in what He said, and He strengthens our faith and belief in His Word, there comes a joy, a peace, and a hope.

What we're saying today is all of these gifts are distributed to us because of His love. This is the love of God displayed to humanity in a broken and sinful world that knows no peace, that has no hope apart from Him, and that literally comes to despair, violence, anger, and hatred. God distributes peace, joy, and hope supernaturally to us from heaven.

Friends, too often we've displayed the Christian life as an intellectual assent—and it is. We want our minds to love God, to come in alignment with His truth. But God wants to take this into our hearts by the power of His Spirit. So we are transformed beings made new in His image, walking in the power of His Spirit, walking in these gifts of His Spirit.

And this is all because of His love. God loves us with an everlasting love. The very heart of God is love. First John 4 tells us, *God is love*. He is love.

Three things that we're talking about today that I want to accentuate about God's love. I want to expound on these things just a little bit. First of all, He's made this love available to all people everywhere. And that includes you, friend, you and me. John 3:16 says, *For God so loved the world*. That's all of us, every one of us here.

For God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son. Jesus came into the world motivated entirely by the love of God, His love for us. This is a mission of love—Jesus coming among us. This child that was given, this Son that was born, is for you and I to understand and come to know the very love of God.

It is not abnormal for people to have doubts about these things and for people to doubt God's love for them. That's not abnormal. One of the things that I've noticed in my time in ministry is that many people

really have no idea how much the Bible says God loves us. The message of the Bible is so clear: God is patient with humanity. He is kind with humanity. He is forbearing with humanity.

In humanity's deep rebellion against Him, God keeps working in kindness, patience, and endurance towards us—keeps reaching out to us, calling us back to Himself so that we might come to experience His love. Many people have no idea how much that is the message of the Bible. And even among those who know the Bible, and know this about what the Scripture says, many seem to not have great confidence in God's love for them personally. Yet the truth is, He loves us.

He loves you, friend, with an everlasting love. He loves all of humanity. *For God so loved the world.*

Now, not everyone comes into his love. Not everyone receives his love, but his love is available to all. It's there for everyone. You, my friend, are precious and important to God. He does love you. He knows your name. All the days ordained for you were written in his book before even one of them came to be.

As a matter of fact, he knit you together in your mother's womb. He knows exactly what you're going through right now. He knows what you feel, what you think, and even a word before it's on your tongue. He knows what you're going to say, and he loves you. You're not a mistake, friends. You're not here by random chance. You are here by the will and the purpose of Almighty God.

Friend, if I could drill this into people's hearts, I would. Friends, God loves you. That's the first thing I want you to know. God is love, and he wants us to walk in peace and hope and joy because he loves us.

But then secondly, he wants this love to work more in us, to set us free to accomplish some things in us. He wants this love to set you and I free from the need to prove ourselves. One of the great lies that the devil has used in this world to get people on an unending rat race that they cannot win is to plant the seed of thought in their mind.

And the seed of thought is this: I must prove my own worth or earn my own value. I must show the world that I matter. As human beings, we long to feel a sense of dignity and worth in who we are. We want to know that we count, that our lives matter. And if we struggle with feeling those things, we're prone to go through great extremes to find these feelings, to have a sense of worth, to have a sense of dignity, to make a name for ourselves, to prove our worth, to look valuable to the world.

If we don't feel loved and we don't feel affirmed in who we are as unique individuals, we will do some very strange things to try to declare our worth. We'll get caught up in all kinds of worldly things and worldly measuring sticks and worldly measurements about what matters. Sometimes people will take identity in all of their accomplishments in life. They'll just cling to all they've done and brag about all they've accomplished. For some, their net worth becomes their self-worth, and they tie how they feel about themselves to the amount of money they have or the riches they have.

I had a friend in high school, and he carried around in his billfold a whole wad of hundred-dollar bills. You could count on him at least once a day, pulling that stack of money out of his pocket and flashing it around like it meant something big. I mean, human beings want to feel like they matter, like they're important, like they have dignity, like they have worth.

And if we don't feel it intrinsically, we will get our identity, our worth, from some worldly thing. The danger in this, friends, is all of these things in the world are temporary. What is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. And if we get the eternal truths in our heart, it radically changes us. If we

know the truth and the truth grounds us deep in our souls, the truth will set us free. We won't become enslaved by needing to keep up with accomplishments or keep our net worth up.

Some people then feel bad about themselves because of their marital status one way or another, or lack thereof. Some people develop a sense of worth, even in their older days, about the number of children they have or grandchildren they have. Or sometimes people have identity and worth based on who they associate with in life.

I mean, I would guess that all of us, at one time or another, have done a little name-dropping to make ourselves look more important, more valuable to those around us. If you've been on social media much, you've probably gotten the idea that some people are constantly trying to impress others by all the pictures that they have out there connecting with other important people in the world. They're just bolstering their own sense of worth and identity by who they're associated with.

Still others get confused and tie their worth and identity to how many acres they farm or the size of their organization or business. Some pastors attach their sense of worth to the size of their congregation or the size of their church. Some people don't feel worth much unless their home is just spotless and cleaned up, just like it should be, or their automobile is perfectly cleansed and detailed.

Other people seem to have a sense of increased value because of the groups or clubs that they belong to, or sports teams that they're associated with, or the neighborhood they live in. And on and on and on it goes — the measures of worldly value and worldly worth. And they're all just simply a dead-end game, friends. A game no one can win.

Sometimes we tie, as I mentioned earlier, to our performance in certain areas. I have to admit, sometimes I feel a little insecure when I'm around a bunch of people who really know how to sing, and they learn that I can't hit a note. We just don't like to feel less than. I've noticed that even as I get older, I can't do all the things I used to do, and sometimes that causes me to question my value or my worth. But that's not really realistic, friends. Aging is a part of life, and you and I are valuable not because of what we can do, but because of who we are — made in the image of God, in the *imago dei*.

You and I are creations of his. He loves us just as we are. He wants us off the rat race of worldly value measurements, to live in the depths of his love so that we can walk in peace and hope and joy, grounded in who we are, secure without having to play the world's games. Set free from that ridiculous worldly game of cat and mouse.

I mean, it is just a rat race, and God wants us off of it, grounded in his love, feeling deep worth in who we are as creations of his. Our value doesn't come from what we do, what our title is, who we're associated with, how much we've accomplished, or what our net worth is. It comes, friends, from the price paid for you and for me.

And God paid the price of his Son. We are purchased with the shed blood of Jesus. We are not our own. We are a treasure of the Most High God, claimed by him forever and ever to display his glory and honor. This is our dignity. This is our worth, friends. It is intrinsic to us, and God wants us to live into it, confident in it, and strengthened in it.

And then beyond that, he wants to set us free from even more — from fears and worries in life. Not just those insecurities, but any kind of fear and worry that we may encounter this side of heaven.

First John 4:18 says this: *There is no fear in love.* When we are grounded deeply in his love, fear dissipates. *Perfect love casts out fear.* And whoever fears, John said, has not been perfected in love.

God not only wants us to know that we are valuable, precious, and important to him, but that he will care for us as his children. He will shepherd us, lead us, and meet all of our needs. Like a good shepherd shepherds his sheep, we have no reason to fear. We can cast all of our anxieties on him because he cares for us, and he's promised to meet every need we have.

This is why Peter said this: *Cast your cares upon him because he loves you and he has promised to care for your needs.* As we seek him and put him first, he has said he will meet every need we have — food, shelter, clothing, anything we need.

And when we sense all of this love, friend, we can then begin to love others and fulfill the law of God: to love him and to love others as we love ourselves.

Let's pray.

Father, thank you for this word, this gift, this miracle of Christmas. Thank you for the gifts of love and hope and peace and joy. May these gifts be ever increasingly present in our hearts, so that we can overflow them to those around us, displaying your love to the world. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.