

All You Need Is Love (Week 2) - The Overflow
Yesterday's Sermon Summary



1. We headed back to the "love letter" of the New Testament, 1st John, in fact to the same paragraph that occupied us last Sunday - [1st John 4.7-21](#) (specifically, verses 7-8, 12, and 19-21).

2. New Testament scholar Thomas Anderson Bennett says that this passage (and many more in 1st John) needs to come with a warning label because its stark, black and white, either/or language is meant to grab hold of the readers' attention and make them begin to ask questions of themselves. But - and this is crucial - the author calls the readers "beloved" and "brothers and sisters," meaning that we're supposed to take these strident, jarring words as if they're coming from someone who really cares about us and has our best interest in mind.

3. So where is love from? Is it from proper rest, stress management, being in a good mood, or liking someone? Of course, these things help. But for the Christian as stated in 1st John 4, love always begins with God. It flows into us and then out of us to others. Thus, our capacity to love is dependent on our connection to God. As St. Augustine of Hippo wrote 1700 years ago, "He who is filled with love is filled with God Himself...We must first love God, and from that love, the love of our neighbor is born."

4. Even for the most earnest, well-meaning Christian, 20th-century theologian Paul Tillich warns of the danger of "horizontalism." What's that? When we attempt to be loving while not prioritizing or depending on our relationship with God. In the end, the telltale signs of "horizontalism" are exhaustion, bitterness, and resentment.

5. So how can you help your spouse, kids, friends, neighbors, or fellow congregants be more loving...of which you and others will be the beneficiary, no doubt? Ask them how they connect with God personally and then help them have the time and make the space to do it. The opposite also holds true - help your friends and family know what avenues or means help you feel close to God so that they can help you do those things. The end result? More love flowing from God to others.

6. So 1st John 4.7-21 would say without hesitation that love - our willingness to love, our ability to love, our breadth of love - is the single greatest barometer or measuring stick for our own spiritual health. As Christian psychologist David Benner writes, "Love is the acid test of Christian spirituality. If Christian conversion is authentic, we are in a process of becoming more loving. If we are not becoming more loving, something is seriously wrong."

7. And if we struggle to love or don't care much about becoming loving to one and all, 1st John 4.7-21 has some rather jaw-dropping assertions to make. First, [verse 8](#) says that if we don't love, we don't really know God. If love is not at the center of who we are, what we believe, and who we're trying to be, then we're left to ask - is it the real God that I really know? The inverse is also true: the more I am trying to love well, the more my eyes and heart will be opened to who God really is, the real God of scripture, the real God revealed most clearly in Jesus of Nazareth.

8. Second, [verse 20](#) declares that those who claim to love God but not others are in fact "liars." Ouch. That begs the question - liars to whom? Well, given that theologically speaking it's impossible to lie to God, it must mean that we are liars to ourselves and others: e.g., we lie about how much we really care, how much we're actually willing to do or sacrifice for another's wellbeing at our own expense, how positively impacted by our relationship with God we are or care to be, and so on.

9. Admittedly, we are all inconsistent in how we love - it's not that we love everyone or love no one, but instead that we love some people or at some times, and we don't love some other folk and/or at other times. Making honest observations about our own inconsistencies in love can be insightful: they show us what we've yet to know or understand about the real God (verse 8), and they put on full display where we are being dishonest - about ourselves, God, and others (verse 20).

10. From time to time we all ask, "What is God up to in my life?" [1st John 4.12](#) contains a most fundamental answer - God's love is trying to be "perfected" (or "brought to completion" or "come to maturation") in you. As New Testament scholar David Rensberger writes, "In Christian love, divine love reaches its goal. When we love one another, God's love accomplishes what it set out to do; it is not finished without our love...You could say that the ultimate aim of all creation and redemption is our love. The world looks at a genuine example of Christian love and says, 'That's it! That's what we were looking for! That's God!' And God looks at that same example of Christian love and says, 'That's it! That's what I've been looking for! That's what I had in mind all along!'"

Poem - "The Overflow"

This poem attempts to express one of the central messages of 1st 4.7-12, namely that our capacity to love is directly tied to our connection with God who pours into us so that we can pour into others.

"The Overflow"

The spring is deep, an eternal, holy well,
Before the first creative word was spoken.
For God is Love - no human tongue can tell
How first God loved, unbound, unbowed, unbroken.
From God the living water starts its course,
A tide undeterred and undaunted from its source.

We are but vessels, not full but empty space,
Designed to catch the torrent from above;
An inherent thirst, always the waiting vase,
Our hearts only filled with a borrowed love.
That which has been conveyed we now bestow,
For our every word and deed are divine overflow.

For only when we love the ones we see
Is God's perfect love made fully known.
On our own there is only scarcity,
A desert in which kindness cannot be grown.
So keep wide the channel that we may receive,
Then through our giving the world might believe
In the overflow.

"The Overflow" This Week

- Begin every day this week being intentional to connect with God, even if only for a few moments: a) remember that you are God's beloved child and that God seeks your best at all times, even if that means to correct or change you, and then b) ask to be a channel for that divine love to others with whom you interact throughout the day. If you want to pray a verse as a focal point, try 1st Thessalonians 3.12: "And may the Lord make you increase and overflow in love for one another and for all, just as we overflow in love for you."
- Make a list: what are the ways that you best connect with God or feel close to God? How can you make a routine or rhythm from those things? How can you ask your family or friends to help you keep that rhythm? Return the favor to your family and close friends - ask them to tell you how they connect to God best so that you can help them pursue and prioritize those practices.
- On Friday or Saturday, take some time to reflect on your week as you tried thoughtfully and intentionally to be "an overflow" of God's love for you and through you to others. Talk to your small group about it. Journal a little about the experience.
- And here are a few online resources on that key idea of staying close to God so that God's love can flow through us to others...each is pretty short, a quick but meaningful read, and the last one is short prayer exercise that might prove very meaningful for you:
 - [God's Love Includes Imperfection](#)
 - [Living in the Flow](#)
 - [The Practice of Encountering Others - St. Paul's United Methodist Church](#)
 - [Contemplation on the Love of God - IgnatianSpirituality.com](#)
- One more resource...you can listen to an entire sermon, broken up into eight short videos, from the renowned Henri Nouwen on being God's beloved so that we can love others: [Being the Beloved](#)