

“The Root of Love”
Sermon Series on 1 John
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First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
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(1 Jn. 1:1-4)

Introduction.

Michael Jordan is arguably the greatest basketball player in history, and he is certainly the greatest player ever to come out of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (Can I get an Amen?) In 1984 when Michael left UNC for the NBA, he famously had a clause written into his contract with the Chicago Bulls that allowed him to play basketball anywhere and anytime he liked in the offseason.

Typically, in the contracts of NBA players at that time there were restrictions on when and where an NBA player could actually play basketball away from the team’s organized practices and scheduled games, because it was a way for the owners to protect their investment. Teams wanted to make sure the player avoided an injury which might occur if they played in a pickup game with just anybody. But Michael Jordan wouldn’t have any of that, and he had his agent write into his contract that he could play basketball anywhere anytime. This provision came to be known as “The Love of the Game” clause, and it was a testament to Michael Jordan’s passion for basketball.

“For the love....” It’s the title we’ve chosen to give this sermon series, and we’re using it to emphasize and focus on the love of God for us and our love for others during the season of Lent we’ve just begun. And the reason for this is because the love of God is the root of our love in Christ, and it is when we are animated by God’s love that we most resemble Him. So let’s join together and study...for the love.

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John Ortberg has written, “Have you ever wondered if God really loves you? And if you’re confident that He does, have you ever wondered why He loves you? Do you ever struggle with sin and wish you had the power to resist and overcome it? Have you ever longed to experience God’s forgiveness and His love in a more profound way? And do you desire to deepen your love for other people and want to discover how to receive their love more freely? If you answered ‘yes’ to any of these questions, then the book of 1 John is for you. These are the very questions this book of the Bible answers in this power-packed short little letter.”¹

In the later part of the first century AD, there were a number of congregations that sprang up primarily as a result of the ministry of the apostle John in an area that was called Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey. Some of the churches had been around for decades, but now they were facing a crisis in their faith. It seems that some false teachers were trying to cast a shadow of doubt on what they had been taught, and these teachers claimed to have special knowledge from God and about God.

The problem was what they were teaching didn't square with the teaching John had given them in the beginning and had also written down in the gospel that bears his name. In response to this turmoil, the apostle wrote this clear and powerful letter to call them back to the basics of their faith, and He reminded them of the bedrock of the foundational teachings that Christians in every century need to remember.

John didn't write about abstract ideas on the periphery of life. No, he gets to the heart of the matter. This letter is an attempt by a spiritual father trying to anchor his children firmly in the faith. He says our spiritual confidence, our hope for the future, the power to overcome sin in our lives and experience forgiveness, and finding direction for how to live all begins and ends with the love of God. John calls us back to the basics of the Christian faith – God's love for us, our love for God, and our love for one another.

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The opening verses of the letter is remarkable in that lacks any salutation or personal reference. In this it differs from all the other letters in the NT with the exception of the book of Hebrews. The author never identifies himself as John in the letter, only as "the Elder," but tradition has identified him as the apostle John who was the son of Zebedee, the brother of James, and one of the first followers of Jesus Christ. He was responsible for writing five books in the NT – this letter and two more, the gospel of John, and the book of Revelation.

The opening paragraph of the letter is a grammatical mess in the original Greek language, and the main verb "we proclaim" doesn't appear until the third verse. But if you untangle the words and sort out the syntax, you discover some powerful truths John was trying to communicate to these Christians in Asia Minor. In outline form the first sentence begins with four relative clauses followed by the phrase "concerning the Word of life," which refers to Jesus.

Let's look at the four relative clauses at the beginning of John's letter. *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched...."* The apostle makes these four statements because he wants to emphasize two things about Jesus – Jesus was divine, and He was also fully human. John begins by saying, *"That*

which was from the beginning.” Here the apostle is making it clear that **Jesus was divine**. He was with God in the beginning of creation, and Christ has always existed eternally with the Father and the Holy Spirit as one of the three persons of the Trinity.

There was never a time when Jesus Christ was not. Never. He was before the beginning, He was in the beginning, and He is from the beginning. Jesus Himself boldly declared, *“Before Abraham was, I am”* (Jn. 8:58) indicating that He was the God of Exodus 3:14 who appeared to Abraham in the OT. In this powerful statement John was contradicting all those who suggested that Jesus wasn’t fully divine and that He was simply a creation of God like the rest of humanity and like the rest of the world. That’s the mistaken notions Muslims and the Jehovah’s Witnesses have today.

The second point John was trying to make clear was that **Jesus was also fully human**. *“...which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched.”* John presents himself as an eyewitness to the events of Jesus’ life. *“We heard Him with our own ears. We saw Him with our own eyes. We touched Him with our own hands. Jesus was no ghost or apparition. He was a real flesh-and-blood human being.”*

In saying this John was trying to counter an early Christian heresy called Gnosticism which said that Jesus was divine but questioned if He was truly human, and it over-emphasized Jesus’ divinity at the expense of His humanity. Gnosticism taught that the material world is evil, and the spiritual is the really important thing in the Christian life. And they believed that salvation came to a person through a mystical, even secretive, knowledge.

One group called the Docetists claimed Jesus was a phantom, and they said that He only appeared to be human. Another group led by a man named Cerinthus said that the Christ-spirit came upon the man Jesus and empowered Him at His baptism, but it left Jesus when He was on the cross. They couldn’t handle the thought of God actually dying, so they came up with a way of explaining away the humanity of Christ in their minds. John deals with the Docetists here in John 1:1-4, and he will take on Cerinthus later on in 5:6-12.

The biblical Jesus was no myth or fairy tale. He was no ghost or illusion. He was in fact God who took on our human flesh. This is the miracle of the incarnation, and it is the central teaching of the church throughout the centuries. Christianity stands or falls on the person and work of Jesus Christ, and it succeeds or fails on whether or not a true and genuine incarnation actually took place in space and time. As John writes in his gospel, *“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son of God who was full of grace and truth”* (Jn. 1:14).

There is one other matter in this passage I want to touch on this morning. It appears in the last verse we read. *“We write this to make our joy complete”* (v. 4). Not partial, not just a little bit, but complete. Full. In this verse John is echoing words he heard Jesus say to His disciples in the Upper Room, *“I have spoken these things to you so that My joy may be in you and your joy may be complete”* (Jn. 15:11). It is because of Christ that you and I can experience a joy the world doesn’t know, and it only comes from a shared life with Jesus Christ in the power of His Spirit.

J.R.R. Tolkien suggests that you and I love fairy tales because they point to an underlying invisible reality, “a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of this world.” We feel in our bones that it must be true, in spite of all evidence to the contrary. We love these stories, he claims, because they are hints and echoes of the one True Story we were all made to hear: the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the most magical story of all.²

Have you experienced this joy? You can. All it takes is to give your life to Christ and invite Him to take up residence in your heart, and he will transform you into the person you were always meant to be in Christ.

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At the beginning of my message I asked, “Have you ever wondered of God really loves you?” The incarnation of Jesus Christ is God’s great affirmation of just how much He cares about you and me, and it provides the power we need to deepen our love for God, our love for ourselves, and our love for other people too. God sent His Son to die on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins and the salvation of your soul, and in Christ’s death and resurrection, He poured out His love for you. When that truth really sinks in, it makes all the difference in the world.

Back in 2012, Tim Keller wrote a little book entitled *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: the Path to True Christian Joy*. In this book Keller talks about how in all of life we live with the pressure of having to perform in order to win the approval of others, and maybe we even think we also have to win the approval of God. Every single day we think we’re on trial, and we feel the pressure to measure up. Some days we feel pretty good about how well we’re doing, and we’re affirmed for the work we’ve done or how nice we look. But other days we’re devastated by the opinion of others because it’s obvious we aren’t good enough in their eyes (or maybe even in our own eyes), and we don’t measure up.

But in Christianity, the moment we believe and put our faith in Christ, God says, “This is my beloved son or daughter in whom I’m well pleased.” And it that moment God imputes Christ’s perfect performance to us as if it were our own, and

we're adopted into His family. And because God accepts me, I don't have to do anything now to build up my resume or make myself look good. Instead, I can now do things simply for the joy of doing them. I can help people, not so I can feel better about myself or to fill up the emptiness in my soul, but simply because the love of God has been poured into my heart and I'm clothed in the righteousness of Christ. It spills over, and now I want to love and help others just because. I'm secure in Christ, and it helps me live a different way.

I read about a woman who used to be Mickey Mouse. She was the person inside the costume at Disneyland. Reflecting on her time "in Mickey," she said, "Growing up, I thrived on behavior modification. I thought: If I'm good, I will be loved. If I'm bad, I will be rejected. I learned to wear a mask and not to show what was really going on in my life. My core beliefs were that I wasn't worthy, accepted, or loved, so I would manufacture ways to get the positive responses I wanted from people. When I put on Mickey's costume, I got that positive response times a hundred." She felt safe and loved, covered in Mickey's "righteousness." But she also gained a new appreciation for what it means to be clothed in Christ. She recalled praying, "Lord, is this what it's like to have masses of people run towards you with joy, excitement and eagerness?"³

This is the root of love. Later on in this epistle John writes, "*We love because He first loved us*" (4:19). This is where true genuine love comes from. It isn't something we have to manufacture or produce. Its source is God, and by our participation in our union with Christ, it is a gift we can receive by grace. God in Christ reaches all the way down into the depths of our human brokenness and pulls us all the way up into the very life of His Son Jesus, and by His power we can now be channels of His love and grace to others with no strings attached. Friends, remember this in the coming week and as we study this epistle from the pen of the John. I think it will make a difference and can actually change your life.

¹ John Ortberg, *Love Each Other* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 11. I am indebted to John for some of the thoughts in this message.

² J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," in *Tree and Leaf* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) 69.

³ Rankin Welbourne, *Union With Christ* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2016) 47.