

GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

August 31, 2014

BE GOOD.



Discussion Guide

Love

1 John 4.7-10, 16-21

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- When did you know you were “in love” for the first time? What did being “in love” look and feel like for you?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Use the Going Deeper notes and comments to explain the background of 1 John and the nature of love.
- Read 1 John 4.7-21 aloud, slowly. Pause. Read the passage once more, aloud, slowly.
- In what terms does John define love?
- If you could paraphrase John’s definition of love, how might you define love?
- In what terms do people today define love? In what ways, if any, are these terms different or similar to the terms John uses? Why might this be? Could you elaborate?

- John argues that love is necessary, part of our pursuit of knowing and being known by God, but that this pursuit of God in love involves our fellow person. What reaction, if any, does this cause in you? Could you explain?
- Do you find it easy or difficult to love your fellow person? Your fellow Christian? Would you elaborate?
- What would it take for you to pursue a loving relationship with your fellow person? Your fellow Christian?
- In what ways, if any, might the practical pursuit of loving your fellow person grow your love relationship with God?
- How willing, if at all, are you to opening your life to God and those around you so that you might grow in love? Could you elaborate?
- Conclude your time together by approaching God together and for one another in a spirit of honesty and authenticity about growing in love.

Context and Background

Hope

The letter of 1 John was written by the Apostle John in response to a congregation’s reaction to his Gospel. It seems that the congregation experienced something of a division with those who left engaging in actions meant to further divide the congregation (1 John 2.19; 4.1). The cause of the division is something of a mystery, but it does seem to involve a belief, by those who left, of attaining to spiritual maturity and thus a view that they were somehow above those who remained (1 John 2.4; 4.1, 8). The bulk of the issue may have involved a form of docetism, a belief that Jesus was not physically the messiah but that the spirit of the messiah came upon him at his baptism and left at his death (1 John 2.22-23; 4.2). This doctrinal belief leads adherents to a form of dualism in which things spiritual and things physical are divided.

This division leads some to a form of asceticism (extreme self-denial) because the physical is deemed to be evil, while it leads others to extreme forms of hedonism (pursuit of pleasure) because the physical is deemed inconsequential. John's approach to the division is difficult to follow but he does make an immense effort to aid the congregation in determining who are and are not true followers of Christ (1 John 2.9-10; 2.29; 3.7-10; 3.16-24; 4.7-21). He also stresses the practical implications of loving those who have departed as well as those who remain as an expression of following Christ and adhering to Christ's way of being (1 John 3.16-18; 4.7-21).

Love

To talk about love is a daunting venture for it seems impossible to say anything new. So much has been written and said about love that many people assume they know what love is (and is not). People define love in many ways because love is expressed in a range of relationships. Unlike the English language, the language of the New Testament recognizes these varying expressions of love in relationship by providing different words to identify these forms. Ancient writers spoke of *storge* as the expression of familial love, *eros* as the expression of romantic or heroic love and *philos* and *agape* as the more general expressions of relational love. The New Testament authors (particularly Paul) picked up the term *agape* to refer to divine love but this is not consistently the case. (In John 21.15-18, Jesus uses both *phileo* and *agape* to speak of love.)

Even though there are varying terms for love, there is a serious ancient tradition which may be traced through thinkers such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, the Cambridge Platonists, and modern philosophers which defines love as seeking and affirming the good of another. The idea of love as an expression of seeking the good of another fits well with the way in which love is presented throughout Scripture. In Scripture, love is portrayed as coming from God's own person, part of his essence (1 John 4.8, 16). God is love at the core of his being and experiences life in loving relationship with himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God's love is unconditional and seeks the well-being of others even though they are at times vicious and undeserving (Hosea 3.1;

Romans 5.8; John 3.16; Ephesians 2.1-10). More than an emotion (though it does include emotion—Matthew 9.35-36), love is primarily an action which can only be expressed publicly and in connection with another person (John 15.9-17). As part of God's own person, love is one of the primary ways in which people may know and experience God (1 John 4.8-21; Matthew 22.34-40). Further, the growing ability to love one's fellow person, while coming from God, demonstrates the surety of one's connection with God (1 John 3.16-18; 4.19-21).

The Text

1 John 4.7-10, 16-18: What is love?

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he states that faith, hope, and love are the preeminent aspects of God's character (virtues) but that of these three, love is the greatest (1 Corinthians 13.13). We gain insight into this line of thought with John's assertion that God is love. Simply put, John asserts that at his core, God experiences and exists in love. This is an ontological (essence of being) statement—not unlike other ontological statements like God is light or God is spirit (John 4.24; 1 John 1.5)—which has huge ramifications for all we understand about God, for it implies that all God is and does is infused with love. We cannot speak of God's justice, his wrath, his kindness, or care apart from his love. To say that God is love is not the same as saying love is God. To express love does not imply that the expression is God. Rather, to say God is love is to say that all expressions of love must somehow flow from God, because he is the source and definition of all that is love. Thus, to know love is to know God and to participate in his essence. This grants great understanding to Paul's statement of the greatest virtue being love (1 Corinthians 13.13) and Jesus' command to love (Matthew 22.34-40), for to pursue love is to pursue God himself.

John's discussion of love is really a practical exploration of Jesus' command to love God and one's neighbor in light of a church division. (See 1 John.) John states (negatively) that to know love is to know God (1 John 4.8). John defines love in terms of the Incarnation, indicating that love has practical, tangible aspects. However, he points specifically to Jesus' sacrificial death on behalf of Sin as the primary example of true love; that is,

God demonstrated love through the sacrificing of his son on behalf of a world caught in sin (Romans 5.6-8). (See Love.)

Because God is and experiences life as love, to know God personally is to know love (1 John 4.16). However, differing opinions exist within the congregation as to the nature of God. Therefore, John defines how one knows he has come to know God's love. He states that to know love in a perfect way is to live like Jesus himself as Jesus is the preeminent example of love. One can know she is living like Jesus (loving perfectly) when fear is no longer present in her life. Fear and love cannot coexist because love pushes out fear. When one knows that another is unconditionally seeking her good, she has no reason to fear.

1 John 4.19-21: Growing in love

Knowing what love is and loving in this way are often radically different. Therefore, John outlines how one might grow in love. One grows in love based upon the presence of God's love in them; that is, love is possible first because God has provided love to us. One grows in his love when he takes the love he has received from God and shares it with those around him in tangible ways (1 John 4.20-21; 3.16-18). John's message would have been shocking, particularly to those who had left the congregation for it firmly connects the spiritual with the physical. To love is not just a spiritual, disconnected practice but to love is to engage in the grittiness of life and relationships which has immense spiritual implications.

Real life with Blake:

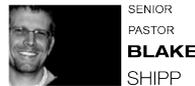
Love is one of those things that is hard for me. Often, I seek to define love in terms of emotion and in relationship with those who reciprocate my emotional overtures. I often separate these expressions of "love" from my expressions of love for God which seems so much deeper and more substantive. I am challenged by John's reuniting of the physical and spiritual, as well as his clarifying statements about love. Life itself is spiritual, every aspect. With this unified life, love becomes the pathway to knowing and being known by God, but I cannot experience this apart from the experience of loving my neighbor.

Somehow in loving my neighbor, in loving them as if I was loving God, I come to know God's character and resemble the person of Jesus. This is not easy for me. I would rather love God and ignore my neighbor. Loving my neighbor is a messy, gritty affair, though sometimes loving them is a whole lot easier than loving my fellow Christian. That can be even trickier for it often involves barbs and wounds over doctrine and the experience of God, something John seems to understand firsthand. But the pursuit of love seems to be eminently worth it, because in love I find God.

Real life with you:

Love is a hard, gritty affair, often marked with much giving and little receiving. Loving takes sacrifice and surrender, a giving for the well-being of another who can, at times, seem to have no concern for us. We would rather love at a distance, wishing another well but doing little to bring good to them. We love God and are loved by him and this is enough, or so we think. Actually, to love God involves loving those around us. To know God's love is to pour ourselves out as he poured himself out. To know God is somehow connected with a willingness to love as he has loved, even when we are not loved back, but in this and only this do we find ourselves enveloped in the essence of God's person. This week you might consider seeking to love others around you by picturing them as Jesus himself. The hurting person you know becomes hurting Jesus. The needy person becomes Jesus in need to you. When we view others in this way we are able to step over barriers and walls that hinder us from loving and we are in many ways envisioning what we are actually doing with our love (Matthew 25.37-40).

Want to know how this looks in real life? Check out Blake's blog at BlakeShipp.blogspot.com



blakeshipp.blogspot.com
twitter.com/blake_shipp