

1 John 4:20-21

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1Jn 4:20 **If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? ²¹ And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God *must* love his brother also.**

The first thing that should stand out to us as we read this passage is the first three words – “**If someone says...**” This was John’s methodology of introducing a subject in the beginning (6X) and he has decided to use it one last time. What John is saying is that this matter of having a genuine love for other believers is something that should simply be obvious and discernible. If the element of loving other believers is missing from the Christian life, then from John’s perspective there is something that is seriously flawed and unreliable in that individual’s understanding of what it even means to be a Christian. Remember that one of the fundamental tenets that John is addressing in this letter is how a believer can know beyond any shadow of a doubt that they are truly saved. He is dealing with the basis of the believer’s assurance, and this issue of loving other believers is one of the major evidences for providing that assurance. [1 John 4:19](#) is very crucial to a proper understanding of this whole section. It simply says,

1Jn 4:19 **We love Him because He first loved us.**

The operative word is “**because**”. The whole point that John is making is that we are completely incapable of loving either God, other believers, or lost people apart from the undeserved salvation that God has given to us. There was nothing in any of us that either merited or deserved God’s love in any way – not one single thing. No believer has ever deserved God’s salvific work in their life. [Romans 5:10](#) clearly sums it up when it says,

Ro 5:10 **For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.**

We were the very “**enemies**” of God. The particular Greek word is “*echthros*” and is derived from the verb “*echtho*” which simply meant to hate and to be actively hostile towards. So, when it is used in its noun form it means to be an adversary and is specifically used of Satan.¹ We simply did not deserve God’s salvation. So the practical side and application of this is simple. What John is emphasizing is that if God saved us and clearly loved us when we were unlovable that the impact of that kind of love towards us is that it should create within us the same propensity and inclination to love and care for other believers who on the surface may seem undeserving. As v19 stated, we love “**because**”. There is a specific reason why we love. The word “**because**” is known as a “causal conjunction” and assigns the cause, motive, or ground for something. So, the reason that we are to love is “**because**” we were loved by God when we were totally undeserving of God’s love. God did not save us just so that we could be forgiven of our sins and be saved from eternal judgment, but also so that we would become a specific kind of person – someone who reflected God’s love to other people.²

So, in exegeting v20, John does not seem to have much sympathy for someone who simply says all of the right things, but is not willing to integrate into their life the truth that they both know and understand. The problem in the Christian life is never life. The problem is the believer. It generally is an unwillingness on the believer’s part to simply be obedient to the way of life that God has provided for

them. It appears that John has had a great deal of experience with individuals who merely said the right things about the Christian life, but they never implemented those truths into their life. Surely this is one of the maladies of the modern cultural church where Christianity has become more a matter of convenience and preference rather than a deeply rooted Christ-centered conviction. Every Christian who sincerely wants to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ has to ask themselves the right questions. In the case of these two verses, the question would not be whether or not “**I love God**”, but whether or not I love other believers. Am I willing to demonstrate the love of Christ to them when they may display inappropriate behavior towards me personally? That is the question that would be more pertinent to this issue. Anyone can say “**I love God**”.

Now what has to be taken from v20 is that if anyone says that they love God, but they have an outward dislike and ill feeling towards another believer, that person is a dishonest person. John calls them “**a liar**” – “*pseustes*”. In other words, what they profess about God and about their salvation is completely contrary to biblical truth.³ As far as John is concerned they simply are someone who is telling lies and therefore is considered to be fraudulent, deceitful, and untruthful in their profession. This is the same Greek word that is used to describe the devil in [John 8:44](#).

Jn 8:44 "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

This particular Greek noun consistently refers to people who are deceptive and untrustworthy.⁴ In fact [1 Timothy 1:10](#) uses this word to clearly describe someone who is not a Christian.

1Ti 1:10 and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching,

In [John 8:55](#) Jesus provides a contrast between Himself and the Pharisees who claim to know God, but in reality did not.

Jn 8:55 and you have not come to know Him, but I know Him; and if I say that I do not know Him, I will be a liar like you, but I do know Him and keep His word.

[1 John 2:4](#) says,

1Jn 2:4 The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him;

What John is clearly stating is that someone who says that they know God, but do not keep his commandments is “**a liar**” – same word, and part of his definition of this kind of person includes those individuals who say the right thing, but simply do not love other believers. Then, in [1 John 2:22](#) he says that those who are liars are actually denying that Jesus is the Christ.

1Jn 2:22 Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.

The Scriptures, whether it is the Old Testament or the New Testament, always present what would be called a “dualism” between God and the devil. That dualism would include things such as light vs. darkness, good vs. evil, life vs. death, or in the case of John’s writings, the dualism would be that of truth

vs. lying, of righteousness vs. unrighteousness, and love vs. hate. That which is false leads to death and is in opposition to the truth of God and the life of God that has been created in the believer. In [John 8:44](#) where Satan is called the “**father of lies**”, lying is more than simply not telling the truth, but denotes the will that is directed against God. It results in unbelief and living in futility. It happens everywhere that individuals put up their personal barriers in resistance to the will of God for their life.⁵

The problem that John is clearly addressing is the issue of someone making a false evaluation of their relationship to God - something which probably happens more often than local churches are willing to accept. The mentality of the modern cultural church is to readily accept any individual's “profession” or personal assessment of their salvation as being genuine, and therefore it becomes something that is not questioned. That would be seen as intruding on the individual's personal integrity and honesty. The problem with that cultural approach is that if that individual is somewhat deluded in their evaluation of salvation, then most likely they will remain in that same mindset and very likely may spend the other side of eternity without Christ. The worst scenario is that the church reach a place where it is not willing to sincerely evaluate and address the reality of someone's personal confession of salvation. It should be clear at this point in the discussion that John wants his readers to fully understand that simply saying the right thing is insufficient. Whatever we confess that we have must be able to be validated and authenticated. This is true for every believer. Jesus said, “**If you love me, keep my commandments**”. He was simply saying that keeping His commandments is a biblical way for a believer to validate their love for God. In [1 John](#), John has given three specific examples of how a believer's confession is validated – [1John 1:6](#), [1 John 2:4](#), and [1 John 4:20\(a\)](#).

1Jn 1:6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

1Jn 2:4 He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

1Jn 4:20 If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar...

All three of these verses are tests that John is providing to validate what would be considered an authentic Christian faith and belief. A true believer cannot continue to walk in darkness, they cannot continue to disobey God's commandments, and they cannot have hatred toward other believers. None of these are acceptable, and every one of them are evidences that someone most likely may not possess salvation. Once again, the problem that the cultural church has is that it wants to make exceptions to each one of these tests, and John simply does not provide that option in these verses.

It is really quite amazing how petty, begrudging, and resentful some individuals within churches often become. We have all heard the spiritual horror stories that have unfortunately taken place within churches – the squabbling and dissension, and ultimately the splitting of churches. Someone says something to someone that they simply do not like, or they think that something needs to be done their way and it is not, so they become un-Christlike. How would John describe all of that? What kind of category would he place those kinds of behaviors and conduct? If we read [1 John](#) honestly and accurately, it would be doubtful that John would even give any kind of salvific credibility to those kinds of individuals or that kind of self-justified behavior. There are times for the sake of God's love operating within us that we have to defer our personal preferences and desires in order to demonstrate a genuine

Christ likeness to someone else. The love of Christ being visibly demonstrated through our life is much more important than us having our way about something. Demonstrating the love of Christ to someone who is immature, selfish, and adolescent in their behavior is often times exactly how God would want us to respond. In fact, [1 John 4:21](#) makes this even more emphatic when John says the following,

1Jn 4:21 And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God *must* love his brother also.

He actually makes it into a New Testament commandment that we love other believers, and based on v20 and [1 John 3:16-18](#), John is clear that love has to be demonstrated in a practical way to other believers. We cannot just simply say that we love people. Love is something that must be visible and actual. It must be the kind of love that is genuinely displayed and expressed in meaningful ways. If it is not, then it does not fit into John's assessment of a meaningful, biblical love for other believers.

The question that John asks is very penetrating. In v20 he asks this question,

1Jn 4:20 ...how can he love God whom he has not seen?

Once again, it is very much a rhetorical question. However, it is important to notice something that is not conveyed in the NKJV. The NIV puts a completely different slant on the translation when it says,

1Jn 4:20 If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

What the NIV does is remove the question. There is no question, but simply a statement that if an individual “**does not love his brother, whom he has seen**” that he “**cannot love God, whom he has not seen**”. The AMP, ESV, NASB, ASV, ISV, RSV, and NRSV do the same exact thing – almost word for word. What all of these translations are doing is removing the question and simply making a very emphatic and dogmatic statement. Now what we have seen throughout this entire epistle is that John consistently speaks in absolutes. He never leaves any kind of spiritual wiggle room. He never opens the door for exceptions. This has been his consistent methodology from the very beginning and he is remaining true to that dogmatism.

There are simply some truths that need to be learned from this entire passage on love. One is that the attitude of Jesus Christ towards people that were lost and at enmity towards Him was never determined by how those people treated Him or what they were saying about Him.⁶ How Christ responded to them was facilitated purely from His love for them, even in the face of their hatred and revulsion for Him. So, the test for the believer is simple – do we have Christ's same quality of love in our life? Do we love unlovable believers and undeserving lost people in the way that Christ loved them? That is the test, and that is why it is my opinion that of all of the tests that John has given so far that this is the one that is the most important simply because it most clearly reveals the depth of the believer's love for God Himself. No love for other believers equals no love for God – that is John's conclusion. Is there another believer in your life right now that you are irritated and exasperated with, and someone that you do not want to be around? Well, if there is, then they become your spiritual litmus test as to the reality of your personal confession of Christ – genuine or just artificial. This is the test that needs to be appreciated – do we as a believer manifest the love of God in our life to other undeserving individuals?

In essence, what John is declaring is that it is spiritually impossible to truly love God in the way that He desires, but not love other believers. Anyone who is serious about their Christian life must understand that God loves those who do not deserve His love, and therefore if the character of Christ is actually being developed in the believer's life, then they will love like he loved. This is an undeniable reality. It cannot be casually dismissed or diminished. Every believer is called on to see other people the way that God sees them – and that becomes the foundation for their love. John will not allow a believer to disassociate their love for God from their love for other believers. In John's theology, they are inseparable from one another. In other words, it is completely improper and unacceptable to John for someone to claim to love God, but not love other believers. If someone really wants to demonstrate their love for God, then simply exhibit a meaningful and visible love for other believers even though they may grate on you at times. Believers cannot allow their feelings and emotions to dictate their love. If that happens, then they will never be inclined to love the unlovable – ever. We have to see other believers the way that God sees them – and He loves them in spite of their shortcomings. We must love other believers in exactly the same way that God loved us.

Let me give you a very practical application of these verses. Write down on a sheet of paper the names of everyone that irritates, frustrates, and aggravates you. It may be me – who knows. Write down the names of every Christian who you simply do not like. They are the people with whom you are more than willing to be very short and curt and to not give much attention to at all. Make a list and then ask God to help you to love them the way that He does. What you will find is that once you make that effort based on God's specific will for your life that your feelings towards those people will begin to change and reflect Christ in a way that may be currently missing. Be at peace with this work of God in you, for you, and for His glory.

ENDNOTES

¹ Strong, 1124.

² Lloyd-Jones, 550-551.

³ Zodhiates, 1493.

⁴ Renn, 592.

⁵ Verbrugge, 620.

⁶ Lloyd-Jones, 551.

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