

LOVE FIRST: 2012 Summer Messages from 1 John
“God Up Close and Personal” 1 John 1:1-10

Intro to series: Heresy was the earliest and most deadly enemy of the church of Christ. The Beloved Disciple wrote First John late in the first century to help believers sort through the confusing claims of the heretics and identify the true nature and practice of faith.

Think about it. John the Apostle writes to help Christians understand the true nature of their faith in Christ and their daily practice of that faith. In so doing, he uses the word love more frequently than it is used anywhere else in the Bible.

I was walking with a young woman down the street one day, talking to her about Jesus Christ. I asked her if she believed that God loved her. She spoke these memorable and very sad words, “Why should God love me. No one else has ever loved me.”

As far as she could tell, no one in this world had ever loved her.

The son of the co-founder of the terrorist organization, Hamas, has become a Christian. Mosab Hassan Yousef, son of Sheikh Hassan Yousef, has abandoned his Muslim faith, denounced his father’s organization, and moved to America.

Mosab received a Bible from a tourist, he said, and he began to read. When he read the teaching of Jesus to “love your enemies,” he was hooked. He had never seen this in the Koran. This kind of love was what the world needed. He became a follower of Jesus, the only advocate he knew for loving your enemies.

Love makes the Christian world go round. Love is central to our theology and central to our practice of faith in the world. The only thing that counts, as the Apostle Paul declares, is “faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6).

I. LOVE HEARD, SEEN AND FELT: *that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked at and our hands have touched* (1 John 1:1).

Why do you think they called John “the Beloved Disciple”? It’s because Jesus loved him. Even in his old age he is still the Beloved Disciple. John never got over the fact that he was beloved by Jesus.

John sat beside Jesus as a 15 or 16-year-old boy, and Jesus cared for him. You have seen that picture of the Last Supper by Leonardo Da Vinci. The movie, *The Da Vinci Code*, made the silly assertion that Mary Magdalene was seated beside Jesus at the Last Supper. That is simply not true. John was seated beside Jesus just as he himself tells us in John 21:20.

John was the Beloved Disciple who felt, heard, saw, and touched that love. And it changed his life forever. When he reflects back on his days with Jesus, and how he knows that Jesus is the One, he thinks about that love that was poured out on him. He calls himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” So he begins this letter talking about how he heard and saw and felt the Word of life. He speaks of Jesus of Nazareth and his companionship with him.

When John introduces the word *koinonia*, he does so in the context of this nearness, this tactile experience of the Word of life. Fellowship implies intimacy, closeness, and connection. John felt all these things in regard to Jesus of Nazareth.

Our youth pastor, Jon Palmer, heard that I would be speaking from First John. He said, “Hey, that First John gets personal, doesn’t it?” Yes, and what John writes he feels deeply, personally.

II. LOVE LEFT OUT: *If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth* (1 Jn 1:6)

I am saying “left out,” not “took out” as if we fully intended to remove all love from our faith and religion. Heaven’s no. We do not try to take the love out. We leave the love out. We take a different angle on faith in Christ. We focus on other things and, inadvertently, neglect to include love in the heart of who we are and what we believe.

Very quickly shallow and uncommitted people began claiming to be Christians. They decided that the gospel was a matter of special “knowledge.” You were a Christian if you had this secret “knowledge” or information that other people did not have. And if you had this “knowledge,” that was all you needed. You could live any way you pleased, do any unholy thing you wanted to do, leave off doing any good thing, because it didn’t matter what you did—it was all about what you KNEW. We call it GNOSTICISM. The word itself is simply the Greek word for “knowledge” with an “ism” on it—“knowledge-ism.” It refers to the idea that you can take some secret knowledge and turn it into the whole ball of wax.

John is writing to the church of Jesus Christ to help them get back to the truth which is in Christ—to the real thing. The letter of First John is an effort to communicate what authentic faith in Christ looks like and how you tell it from the fake kinds.

And he uses the word “love” 33 times in this little letter. It is the most intense discussion of love in the Bible. Get the message. You cannot reduce faith in Christ to four or ten propositions to which you give mental assent. If you are thinking that you are a Christian because you know five things that most people don’t know, then you may be a Gnostic rather than a Christian.

How do you tell authentic followers of Jesus from the fake ones? How do you authenticate your faith? Love, love, love, love, love, love L-O-V-E!!! You’ve got to tell it, you’ve got to show it, you’ve got to feel it, you’ve got to touch it.

Love you mother, love your brother, love your neighbor, love the stranger, love your enemies. Love is the act which authenticates the gospel in theology and in life.

***Ja’van Hill is pictured here holding a photograph of his father who was murdered in New Orleans that week.

I used this picture of Ja’van when I spoke at New Orleans Baptist Seminary back in August of 2005. God was doing this work in my life, bringing me back to the practical, tactile side of the gospel—hearing, seeing, and touching.

Ja’van is a symbol for me of the pain, poverty, and death that plagues the streets of New Orleans. We worked with the children in the Florida Housing Community for 14 years before Katrina. We saw them living in their hovels. We knew that many of them could not read. We saw the vicious cycle of poverty, drugs, and violence that destroyed their lives. I asked those new seminary students to reach out to Ja’van because Jesus would do so.

Four days after I challenged the seminarians to reach out to Ja’van virtually everybody left the city—all those students and the entire seminary family and all the Ja’vans and their families, too.

I am a little slow, and it has taken me awhile to get the message of this chain of events. But God is delivering his message loud and clear to me now. He wants his people back in the business of active, visible, touchable love. He took the thousands of Ja’van’s in New Orleans and distributed them throughout the United States, most often to people of faith who lived in small communities. They poured out their love upon the evacuees, and the Ja’vans encountered the Gospel in a tactile, personal, unforgettable way.

III. LOVE RESTORED: *If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:7).*

Those flooded churches looked like an angry giant had ripped through them, tearing the pews loose, tossing them into piles, overturning pianos and organs and even the communion tables, and shredding the orderly arrangement of the house of worship.

My mind was afraid to go there for a long time, but I finally began to connect those piled pews and overturned pianos with JESUS CLEANSING THE TEMPLE. Jesus made a mess of that temple—turning over the tables, scattering the coins, turning loose the animals and chasing them down those stone courts, turning his whip on the people there, and creating a general chaos in the house of worship. I always thought it was strange that we called that messy, noisy, scrambled event “The Cleansing of the Temple.”

I know people who think New Orleans flooded because of the French Quarter and the flesh markets, the prostitution, drugs and drunkenness. But I can tell you for sure, the French Quarter did not flood. The men’s clubs never took on water.

Down at the French Quarter they were doing the natural things that lost people do—getting drunk, taking drugs, worshiping idols, stealing, cheating, and sleeping around. That behavior is as old as the human race, and there is nothing remarkable about it. These people are lost. They live in darkness. This is what people have always done when they had no hope or faith.

If Hurricane Katrina brought a judgment, it brought that judgment to the house of God. Thousands of churches were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. Many of them disbanded forever. Church buildings were flooded and had to be completely rebuilt. Entire congregations picked up and moved to Dallas or Atlanta.

Maybe Jesus was cleansing OUR temples down there on the bayou. Maybe he was turning over our tables and our pews and scattering our things. Maybe Jesus is as upset with our religion as he was with theirs. Maybe he wants to wash us out of our favorite pews where we are comfortable, protected, and stuck, and send us into

his world where the dying need us now. *The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love* (Galatians 5:6).

Conclusion: Isaac was trying to authenticate the identity of his son, Esau. He thought he was talking to Jacob because the voice sounded like Jacob. But Jacob had covered his hands with goat skins so he his hands would feel like Esau's. He had put on Esau's clothes so he would smell like Esau. Isaac felt his hands. He said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau" (Genesis 27:22). Isaac pulled him close. He smelled his clothes. And when he caught the smell of the field, he gave him his blessing. Isaac, the blind father, was fooled. But Isaac did know how to authenticate his son, and so did Jacob, the deceiver. You do so through touch and smell.

Maybe the Lord Jesus will one day authenticate us, not by our voice, but by our hands. He will be feeling those hands to see if they have been working in the fields. He will be smelling our clothes to see if we have been in the field. And that is how he will know who you really are.