

God is Love (1 John 3-4)

Fifth lesson from the Catholic Letters

The understanding of Love: What is the understanding of love in the secular world? Love is and always has been a complex concept. Some understand it as an emotion, a state of being, a choice, an ability, a gift, a force, or all of the above. Everyone believes that love is important but love is usually thought of as a feeling. In reality, love is an action. The English word “love” has been used in reference to a “strong affection for another”. The English language has only one word for love, but it has other words *implying* love such as affection, affinity, liking, care for, bond, friendship, attraction, etc. Human love, therefore, cannot be simply defined, as it is being redefined and evolved all the time. Humanity has always struggled to define love, and is constantly redefining it, but God’s love is clear and will never change:

What is the understanding of love in the Biblical world? Before we explore the Biblical understanding of love, it is better to know the Hebrew and Greek words which denote love in order to grasp the meaning of love in the Bible.

Love in Hebrew language: Hebrew language employs three words *Aheb*, *Chabab* and *Chashaq*.

Aheb means to delight in, to desire, and to be attached. It is a tender and earnest love to see an be in the presence of other. Friendship love between David and Jonathan (1 Sam 18:1), tender love between Issac and Rebecca and the parental love of Abraham for Issac. *Aheb* love is unselfish, serving the beloved and making sacrifices for him or her. We should strive to love one another like this.

Chabab: it means to hide in the bosom/ to cherish with affection and and protect it from any harm. (Deuteronomy 33:3)

Chashaq: It means to “have a delight, have a desire, fillet, long, set in love.” It can refer to God’s love for His people (Deuteronomy 10:15), a man’s love for a woman (Genesis 34:8), or our love for God (Psalm 91:14)

These words reveal that God loves us with tenderness of *ahab* love, the protection of *chabab* love, and the delight of *chashaq* love.

Love in Greek language: Greek language has four words to denote love

Erōs (ἔρως): Romantic love; erotic desire; intimacy; infatuation with another’s beauty.

Philia (φιλία): Brotherly love; friendship; affectionate regard for and loyalty to friends, family, and community; requiring virtue, equality, and familiarity.

Storgē (στοργή): Familial love; affection; natural empathy for one’s family, country, or team.

Agapē (ἀγάπη): Unconditional, self-sacrificial love; charity; God’s unconditional, self-sacrificial love for humankind and humankind’s love for a good God and for others.

Love in the Bible: God is the source of all love. He loved us enough to sacrifice his Son for us. Jesus is our example of what it means to love. Everything he did in life and death was supremely loving. The Bible book, 1 John, says 'God is love' and 'love comes from God'. Love is about a deep and strong commitment which goes beyond feelings. It is immensely powerful. The Bible book, Song of Songs says, '...love burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame, many waters cannot quench love'. There is a passage about love in the Bible book 1 Corinthians which is often read at weddings. It summarizes the Christian view of love... 'love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails..'

We believe that God made people because he loves us. He wants us to love him. We were created to be in a relationship with God and to honor him. He wants us to talk to him regularly by praying so that we deepen that relationship. We believe that nothing can separate them from God's love. It is permanent and eternal. And it does not depend on us. In the Bible book, Ephesians, the writer Paul - a key leader in the early Christian church - tries to show the vastness of God's love shown through Jesus Christ. He prays that believers will have the power 'to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ...' We understand Jesus' love in his public life when he interacted with people during his three years of teaching. He spent time with the poor, the outcasts and the deprived. His love was practical: he healed sick people, some of whom no-one else would go near. He told stories to illustrate God's love for people. In what was a very male-dominated society, Jesus talked with women and children not down to them.

Love in John's Letter: How does John, the beloved disciple of Jesus Christ, describe the love of God, fully manifested in Jesus Christ? John calls God is love using the word agape.

So, what does it mean that God is love? Love is an attribute of God. Love is a core aspect of God's character, His Person. God's love is in no sense in conflict with His holiness, righteousness, justice, or even His wrath. All of God's attributes are in perfect harmony. Everything God does is loving, just as everything He does is just and right. God is the perfect example of true love. Amazingly, God has given those who receive His Son Jesus as their personal Savior the ability to love as He does, through the power of the Holy Spirit ([John 1:12](#); [1 John 3:1, 23-24](#)). We believe that God is the source of love. He is the embodiment of love. In the Trinitarian God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit., There is deep love between all three.

- The love of God or the love of Christ for humankind.
- The love of Christians for other persons, corresponding to the love of God for humankind.
- Unselfish love of one person for another/ brotherly love.
- It is a pure love and spiritual love

God's love is not self-love, but rather self-sacrificing love: "The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him? Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth " (1 John 3:16-18). According to this passage, Jesus is the reason we even know what spiritual love is! In laying down His life for us, He taught us everything we need to know about true love.

God's love is generous, not selfish or greedy: "In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins" (1 John 4:9-10). "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

God's love is unending, not a temporary feeling, emotion, or attraction: "Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:8). " For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39). Nothing can separate us from God's love!

God's love is lavish: "See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him" (1 John 3:1). Once we were enemies of God, but because of God's great love for us, demonstrated in the death and life of Jesus, we can be called His children.

God's love is all-encompassing: God does not select only the beautiful people or the rich, or the successful to love; He loves the world. He loves us so much that He gave His Son in order that the world could be saved, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17 /John 1:29). Notice that God's love is for everyone in the world; whoever believes in Him. Many times, the world's idea of love is to love those who can further your career or those from whom you can get something that you need.

God's love is self-sacrificing, generous, extravagant, lavish, costly, limitless, boundless, measureless and unconditional. Worldly love is selfish, self-serving, and cares more for what it *gets from* a relationship than what it *gives to* that relationship. Many marriages and friendships fail because this is the type of love the participants exhibit. Only when relationships are built on God's love will they flourish.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 *“Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.”*

God’s love is steadfast and unmovable: The apostle Paul, writing to the Roman Christians, assures us, *“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 8:38-39). God’s love is sure. God loves us whether we respond to Him in love or not. His love for us is not based on our response, but on His character. The Bible says that God is love (I John 4:8, 16). Now, this does not mean that because God loves everyone people do not have any responsibility to respond to His love. What it means is that God is always ready to wrap us in His loving arms when we turn to Him in repentance and faith.

God’s love is personal: God became personally involved in our salvation. The entire biblical record shows us that a large part of God’s character is that He is personal. He did not simply lay down a set of rules to follow and then sit down in Heaven to watch us attempt to keep those rules. On the contrary, the rules God gave were given to reveal to us the fact that we are unable keep enough rules to be holy, rather what makes us holy is a personal relationship with God. From Genesis to Revelation the witness of God’s Word is that God is a personal God who desires to have a personal relationship with every one of us. Worldly love is oftentimes impersonal.

God’s love is total (Ephesians 3:16-19): It reaches every corner of our experience. It is wide, covering the breath of our experience. It is long, covering the length of our life. It is high rising to the heights of our celebration. His love is deep, reaching to the depths of discouragement, despair and even death. When we feel shut or lost, let us remember that we can never be lost in God’s love.

What Does the Bible Say about Loving Yourself?

- *“Love your neighbor as yourself”* (**Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31**).
- *“The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners...”* (**Leviticus 19:34**).

We naturally love and care for ourselves. We should notice that the Bible never directly tells us to love ourselves but God and others. We take care of our own needs. We do so to the extent of putting ourselves and our welfare, needs, desires, and ambitions first, before God and before others. It is for this reason that God’s Word says, *“Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves”* (Philippians 2:3). The problem is not that we do not love ourselves, but that we love ourselves too much and others too little. Our Self-love or natural love

should be transformed into spiritual, or Christ-like love. Most sins stem from love of self and a lack of love for God and others. Think about it: hate, greed, envy, murder, strife, gossip, slander, arrogance and pride all result from a love of self. When we love ourselves without regard for God or others, the result is sin. If God's law is summed up by love for God and love for others (Matthew 22:37-40), then sin, defined in Scripture as "lawlessness," is any thought, word, or deed void of (spiritual) love.

Selfish love: "But understand this: there will be terrifying times in the last days. People will be self-centered and lovers of money, proud, haughty, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, irreligious, callous, implacable, slanderous, licentious, brutal, hating what is good, traitors, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, as they make a pretense of religion but deny its power. Reject them" (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

How to see God of love in Imprecatory psalms: An imprecation is a curse that invokes misfortune upon someone. Imprecatory psalms are those in which the author imprecates; that is, he calls down calamity, destruction, and God's anger and judgment on his enemies. This type of psalm is found throughout the book. 5, 10, 17, 35, 58, 59,69, 70, 79, 83, 109, 129, 137, and 140 are the imprecatory psalms.

The following are a few examples of the imprecatory language gleaned from these psalms: "Declare them guilty, O God! Let their intrigues be their downfall. Banish them for their many sins, for they have rebelled against you" (Psalm 5:10). "Rise up, LORD, confront them, bring them down; with your sword rescue me from the wicked" (Psalm 17:13). "Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you, on the kingdoms that do not call on your name; for they have devoured Jacob and devastated his homeland" (Psalm 79:6-7). "Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks" (Psalm 137:9).

How to interpret and understand these imprecatory psalms as a Christian in our times? When studying the imprecatory psalms, it is important to note that these psalms were not written out of vindictiveness or a need for personal vengeance. Instead, they are prayers that keep God's justice, sovereignty, and protection in mind. God's people had suffered much at the hands of those who opposed them, including the Hittites, Amorites, Philistines, and Babylonians. These groups were not only enemies of Israel, but they were also enemies of God; they were degenerate and ruthless conquerors who had repeatedly tried and failed to destroy the Lord's chosen people. In writing the imprecatory psalms, the authors sought vindication on God's behalf as much as they sought their own.

The love of Jesus: Jesus is the reason we even know what love is. It was Jesus himself who once said, "Greater love (agape) has no one, than he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13), and Jesus himself was to do this very thing. In laying down His life for us, He taught us everything we need to know about true love. The fullest expression of God as love was through the Son, Jesus Christ. God created us, sustains us, and has revealed Himself to us through Jesus. John 1:14 declares, "And the Word

became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Jesus instructed us to love our enemies and pray for them (Matthew 5:44-48; Luke 6:27-38). The New Testament makes it clear that our enemy is spiritual, not physical (Ephesians 6:12). It is not sinful to pray the imprecatory psalms against our spiritual enemies, but we should also pray with compassion and love and even thanksgiving for people who are under the devil's influence (1 Timothy 2:1) We should desire their salvation. After all, God "is patient . . . not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Above all things, we should seek the will of God in everything we do and, when we are wronged, leave the ultimate outcome to the Lord (Romans 12:19). The bottom line is that the imprecatory psalms communicate a deep yearning for justice, written from the point of view of those who had been mightily oppressed.

Jesus' teaching on love: When asked which is the greatest commandment, Jesus paraphrased the Torah: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind". He also added one more commandment "You shall love your neighbor as yourself". These two commandments form the core of Christianity according to Jesus. Jesus gives us two commandments that summarize all the laws and commands in Scripture. The Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 deal with our relationship with God and then our relationship with other people. One naturally flows out of the other. Without a right relationship with God, our relationships with others will not be right, either.

New commandment: Jesus revealed the "new commandment" in John 13:34-35, while speaking to His disciples on the night He was betrayed by Judas. He had watched His traitorous disciple leave the dinner table to complete the evil deed. After Judas was gone, Jesus spoke to the remaining eleven: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Jesus had taught the disciples many things during the three years they had been together, but this new commandment was the final one before He was crucified. What would it take to impact the world as He had done? It wouldn't be their speaking abilities, their miracle-working powers, or their courage. Jesus said the world would be drawn to His message when it saw His followers continuing to love each other. In giving the new commandment, Jesus laid the foundation for the formation of a group of people unique in human history. Jesus created a group identified by one thing: love. Followers of Christ are recognized by their love for each other.

Do you love me? Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" as recorded in John 21:15-17. This occurred when Jesus was having breakfast with His disciples soon after His resurrection. Jesus used this opportunity to encourage and exhort Peter about his upcoming responsibilities and even to prophesy the manner in which Peter will die. By asking Peter, "Do you love me?" three times, Jesus was emphasizing the importance of Peter's love and unswerving obedience to his Lord as necessary for his future ministry.

Jesus begins by questioning Peter about His love for Him, and each time Peter answers in the affirmative, Jesus follows up with the command for Peter to feed His sheep. His meaning is that, if Peter truly loves his Master, he is to shepherd and care for those who belong to Christ. His words reveal Peter's role as the leader of the new Church, the Body of Christ there in Jerusalem that will be responsible for spreading the gospel after Jesus' ascension into heaven.

It is possible that by His repeated question Jesus is subtly reminding Peter of his three denials. There's no doubt those denials and how he felt when Jesus turned to look at him at that moment were seared deeply into Peter's mind (Luke 22:54-62). It wasn't lost on Peter that Jesus repeated His question to him three times, just as Peter previously denied Him three times.

Whatever the reason for the three-fold "*Do you love me?*" question, Jesus was impressing on Peter how important his new role of tending the flock of Christ's followers would be. When someone repeats instructions to us over and over, we quickly understand that it's extremely important for us to heed them. Jesus wanted to make sure Peter understood this vital charge He was tasking him with and the ultimate reason for it, to follow Him and glorify God (John 21:19).

Final judgement based on mercy, love and compassion (Matthew 25:35-36, 40). Jesus wants our lives to overflow with mercy, love, and compassion – the marks of His kingdom. As followers of Jesus, we have a choice: respond to unsettling realities in fear and withdraw, or follow Him in responding to the greatest needs of our day with love and hope. We know salvation doesn't depend on works, but we also know that caring for those in need is evidence of a faith that changes lives. While Jesus wants us to be compassionate and caring to all people, this passage is primarily about how we treat those the world seems to think are the least. This least group of people are called by Jesus as his own brothers and sisters. The least, the last, and the left out become the primary ones who come to Jesus and find life, love, and lasting hope. Jesus' promise is that as we care for those in Jesus' community, no matter their circumstance, we are caring for him. We can actually experience Immanuel, God with us, when we care for disciples of Jesus!

Christianity and Love: Christianity is about a personal relationship with Christ, the bringer and perfecter of love and not rule-following. Most of the metaphors in the New Testament, that describe our walk with Christ, have to do with **relationship, rather than rule-keeping.**" And a relationship with Christ means a relationship with the people around us, because God's gift of unconditional love comes in human form, not material possessions. And relationships do have rules. As the brides of Christ, we must not think of our relationships with Christ as a rule-following endeavor, but rather like we'd think of the most important relationship of our lives. John Piper, the famous Baptist preacher, says that Christianity is "not first and foremost a religion. It is first and foremost news." It is news that God has loved us and set us free through the death and

resurrection of his only son. Christianity is, above all else, about relationship and love, not rule-following

Horizontal and Vertical Love: Vertical love is defined as loving God. Horizontal love means loving people. Jesus showed his disciples how these two loves are intertwined in practical ways. While our relationship with God is based on faith alone, He warns and encourages us to see that the way we treat people affects our experience of Him. There is no doubt that the cross is the most recognized symbol of Christianity. It symbolizes what our Lord endured for us, what we carry, and our hope for salvation. There is so much meaning wrapped up in this one symbol of our faith. The cross is made up of two beams of wood – one vertical and one horizontal. The vertical beam symbolizes our relationship with God while the horizontal beam represents our relationship with others. We need both to form a cross. We need both to be Christian. We use the vertical beam to represent our relationship with God because we are inferior and He is all-supreme. We look up at Him while He lovingly looks down upon us. We reach for heaven while He extends His mercy and grace down to us. This vertical relationship illustrated in the cross is a beautiful thing to imagine. We need to put effort strengthening that vertical relationship. We do this by participating in his sacrifice, praying to God every day and listening to how He speaks back to us, just as we would in any other relationship. This vertical relationship is not passive.

The horizontal beam represents our relationship with others. We know that we make up the Body of Christ and that we are all connected to one another on this horizontal plane. Everything we do affects the rest of the parcels on that beam. When we sin, it affects our neighbor. When we are charitable and loving, it also affects our neighbor. Again, this relationship between persons is not passive. Christians are called to action. Remember the corporal acts of mercy in Matthew 25:35-40 where Jesus tells us to do things like feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the imprisoned. He reminds us that, in doing these things for the least of our brothers, we are doing them for Him. We honor Jesus Christ by being in the right relationship with our neighbor and thereby strengthening our horizontal beam.

St. Augustine's famous Latin quote is this "**Ama Deum et Fac Quod Vis**" which means "**Love God and Do what you want**". If we truly love God, we will truly love our brothers and sisters without any prejudice or partiality. We will be makers of peace and harmony. We will create culture of unity and charity. We will not misuse or violate the rights of others. When we are not motivated by love, we become critical of others. We stop looking for good in them and see only their faults. Love is more important than all the spiritual gifts exercised in the church body. Great faith, acts of dedication or sacrifice or miracle working power produce very little without love. Love makes our gifts and actions useful.