

As a reminder, we're starting our church-wide series called 40 Days of Love.

I'll be reading from 1 John, chapter 4, which should be a familiar text to many of you...as this is the text that you studied with your table group in the gym last week. I'll be reading verses 7-12.

By the way, if you purchased the book at the Welcome Center (The Relationship Principles of Jesus) and you're going through the daily devotions in there, today is Day 1 of that 40 devotional.

We still have more of these books for sale at the Welcome Center if you want to purchase one after the service.

Alright, let's read our text, starting at verse 7.

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."

Intro: I want to start out this morning by giving you a few clues about a company that started up in 1997 and we'll see if you can figure out which company this is. Does this sound like a fun activity?

Here we go...again, it started up in 1997, and was founded by 2 guys with the first names Reed and Marc.

It is an S&P 500 company in today's stock market.

22 years later, their product is subscribed to by more than 148 million people worldwide today.

Anyone know it yet? Ok, here's two more clues that will probably give it away.

Their logo is black and red.

Last clue: Anyone 18 years or younger wouldn't know this, but they used to send DVD's to their subscribers through the mail. You'd watch it, and then mail the DVD's back 3 days later.

Someone in here knows it by now, right? (Netflix Image)

This powerhouse company's stock has risen more than 500% in the past 5 years, and I recently heard a quote from Netflix CEO, Reed Hastings, that I'd like to share with you in just a minute.

Reed was at "Summit LA", which is an annual conference that features some of the most successful businesses and performers around the world.

At this summit, Reed spoke of his company's effectiveness in getting people to not only purchase a Netflix subscription, but to keep it long term.

By the way, could we get a show of hands in the room of who currently has a Netflix subscription?

A popular show that has swept the nation in recent years is a show called "Stranger Things". I have not seen this show, nor do I know much about it.

But here's a staggering statistic about that show. 70% of people who watched season 1 of Stranger Things averaged 5 episodes per sitting. This is called "binge-watching", and many of us in the room would probably admit to having "binge-watched" a show before.

Netflix fuels this type of viewing entertainment because immediately after the current episode ends, there is the automatic playing of the next episode.

And here's the quote I really wanted to share with you, and then we'll move on. Reed said at the 2017 Summit LA conference that "Sleep is our biggest competition". Not Hulu or YouTube TV, but SLEEP.

The Question: And that quote got me thinking...we're going through this series on LOVE and I wondered, what is Love's greatest competition?

Just a few minutes ago, we read in verse 8 (and you'll find it again in verse 16) that John defines God as "LOVE". If God is love, then what, or who, is God's greatest competition?

Well the obvious answer is Satan. But I'd like go beyond that and talk about the weapon that Satan *maybe most commonly* uses...and that's selfishness.

We established last week (and this is nothing new) that Love is not a feeling, but a decision. And selfishness is simply the decision not to love. Or I guess it could be the decision to only love one's self.

Maybe you're in this room today (or listening online) and you don't want to be selfish, but you find yourself continually falling into that pattern?

Paul speaks of this kind of behavior (which he claims as his own) in Romans 7. I'd like you to read verse 19 with me, because I believe all of us can relate to what Paul says here.

Read with me...

"For I do not do the good I WANT to do...but the evil I do NOT want to do—this I keep on doing."

Doesn't this drive you crazy? We know something is wrong, we don't want it one minute, and then we find ourselves doing it the next minute. It's this conflict of desire vs. morality.

Theme: The goal of this series is to learn how to love more effectively. In order to do that (in order to be less selfish and more loving), the solution is NOT simply trying harder. The solution is to consistently look to the One who IS LOVE.

This is why we go to church and meet in Life Groups. This is why we go to youth group as a kid and get together with other people who love Jesus.

Yes, you can be a believer in Jesus while staying at home, but you're probably not going to look at the One who IS LOVE near as often. You'll find yourself *trying* harder to love, but not succeeding.

I think now is as good of a time as any to say what I really want us to understand as we head into this series.

Our culture views Love as weak, and I think that couldn't be further from the truth. Love is not some touchy-feely word that produces timidity. Love is actionable, it's powerful, and it's life-changing.

2 Timothy 1:7 supports this claim, which says.

"For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but of power, love and self-discipline."

Many of us would claim that it was God's love...through another human being...that created a desire for us to begin a real relationship with Jesus. And now our lives look different.

Love is what makes the impossible possible. It's choosing to set aside the differences between you and your neighbor and deciding to invest in them.

If you don't believe me, then explain to me how a Michigan fan can love a Buckeye fan, or how a Purdue fan can love that other school down in Bloomington.

So how do we ensure that we're consistently looking to the One who IS LOVE?

1. First of all, we need to stop focusing on the fear of failure, and instead focus on God's love.

Here's an example of the fear of failure. Let's say you and I are addicted to alcohol and all that keeps going through our heads is two words..."Don't drink, don't drink, DON'T drink". If that's what our mind is focusing on, what do you think is going to happen?

We're going to drink! A "Don't-centered focus" is SURE to result in do-ing the thing you don't want to do. **Living in fear of messing up is no way to live.**

We didn't read this far today in 1 John 4, but verses 18-19 fully support living in love, not in fear. This is what it says...

"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."

So instead of saying "don't drink" over and over again, we might repeat to ourselves something like "Jesus loves me and I want to be better for Him. Jesus loves ME and I want to be better for HIM."

You might say “I’ve tried thinking positively, but it just doesn’t work when the temptation grows stronger.” But remember what we concluded earlier...simply trying harder isn’t going to work.

God set up His people to live in community together...a community that displays and pours out love. He called this His church, a place or a people group where we can draw love and support from, which identifies with the love of God.

Take a look at Hebrews 12:1-2 up on the screen.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses (that’s the church), let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”

In these verses, we see the priorities of the Christian person. There’s an intentionality to “Surround ourselves with a great cloud of witnesses”, people who love Jesus and who want to live life in community.

And then there’s the phrase “fixing our eyes on Jesus”...which is this strategy that trains us to effectively choose to LOVE, and not to be selfish. That means that the church is not a CLOSED community, but a community that actively loves others IN THE SAME WAY that we see Jesus loving us.

So by experiencing the love of Jesus more and more, we will be inspired to love our neighbors.

This idea of focusing on the positive and not the negative is found all throughout the Bible. 1 Timothy 6:11 says...

“But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.”

Yes, there is instruction to flee...to run in the other direction, away from potential evil. But the focus is clearly to be on the Good things that are of God.

Being reminded of God’s love for us, will certainly allow us to love others more effectively.

2. The second way we can draw from the true love of Jesus, is by observing the way God pursues us.

This point is similar to my first point, but it zeros-in on a more specific characteristic within God’s love...His pursuit of us.

A constant debate in the broader Christian community is whether or not someone can lose their salvation...whether or not someone can fall away from their faith.

I’m convinced that you can’t. There are several verses I could use to make my case, but I think 2 verses in Romans, chapter 8, are all that we need.

Paul says in verses 38-39...

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,^[a] neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

I think that verse sets a record for the number of commas used in one sentence!

Paul covers the whole spectrum here. There’s absolutely nothing that can separate us from the love that John talked about in our original text.

1 John 4:10 says “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

If you’ve experienced the love of Jesus, and you understand that He died for you (before you loved Him or even had a thought about Him), then there’s NO WAY you can pull yourself away from God’s grip.

His pursuit of us is not a forceful grip...it’s a loving grip. And it’s stronger than any power and any THING in existence.

I have an analogy from my personal life that I think demonstrates the love of a Father who pursues his child. **(Track Image)**

Up on the screen you’ll see a skinny 17 year-old kid. His name is Jeremiah...no I’m just kidding, that’s me.

It was my Junior year of high school and I was competing at the track & field state meet in Michigan.

There were 18 high school boys in the state who qualified for the 2-mile run. I was ranked 3rd, but the weather conditions were NOT to my liking. It was 96 degrees when the gun went off. The hottest day of the year.

Four laps into the race...I knew it was over. As I watched one after another pass me by, I crossed the finish line...in 18th place...dead last.

I was crushed, physically and emotionally...and I didn’t want to see anyone. I went outside the track, and then outside the fence, and into the tall grass where not a soul was around.

Everyone had come to watch me run this race. My family, my teammates, my grandparents, my coaches, even college scouts. I didn’t want to face anyone.

And you know who was hot on my trail...it was my DAD. I remember this so clearly. He put his arm around me and said “You didn’t let anyone down, Michael. Come back with me.”

And this is how God is with us. We fail, we seclude ourselves, and yet we have a Father who relentlessly pursues us. That’s the kind of love that we have the opportunity to focus on...and to then demonstrate to others.

While we've dipped into several places in Scripture, I figure we should hear directly from Jesus about His pursuit of us, so let me share a few verses that Jesus spoke in Matthew 11, verses 28-30. You might recognize them.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

I've heard these verses and have been comforted by them several times in my life. But about a month ago, someone explained to me the meaning of this analogy that Jesus was talking about.

(Yoke Image) If you don't know what a yoke is, it's a wooden crosspiece that fastens over two animals (typically oxen), who work side by side to pull a heavy load or a tiller to work the ground.

And this kind of labor was most effective when an inexperienced ox was paired up with one that was strong and knew the drill.

So Jesus describes Himself here...as the strong ox. He pursues us, He saddles up next to us...He carries the heavy load (does the grunt work), and He even teaches us along the way.

Jesus' pursuit of us is a relationship...a one-on-one relationship. And somehow, He's capable of doing that with every one of us.

3. A third and final way we can love more effectively is for us to root our identity in Jesus Christ...not in the world.

Jesus knew that we were going to have an identity crisis, even 2000+ years after His death (and resurrection)...and He prayed for us. We find this prayer in John 17, starting at verse 15. He says...

"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not OF the world, even as I am not of it."

Jesus's claim here is that if you believe in Him and trust Him as your Savior, then you're in the same category as Him...He was not OF the world and neither are you.

Being OF the world is belonging to, or having an identity in, this world alone. It's the acceptance that we are held under the world's physical and emotional effects. You could even go as far as to say that **being OF the world is like being a slave**, hungering and thirsting after things that will never please.

But being IN the world is this lifestyle of belonging to the family of God (knowing our eternal destination)...but sticking around for the good of those around us.

I know this can be confusing, so let's come at it from another angle.

I'll start out with having an identity in Christ, and then I'll compare that to having an identity in the world.

If your identity is found in Jesus, then you'll reap incredible benefits. Romans 8 uses the following language to describe a person who belongs to Jesus: He describes this person as someone who is...

- Led by the Spirit
- A child of the Creator God
- An heir of God's glory
- And as someone to whom God will reveal "His rich glory to" when the time is right

Psalm 24:1 tells us... "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." And if we're heirs of God, then we inherit everything that belongs to Him.

A few chapters earlier (in Psalm chapter 2), God promises to "give us the nations and the very ends of the earth as our inheritance."

It's unfathomable, all that we will receive from God, because He was gracious enough to love us, pursue us and mark us as His own.

Having your identity in the world though...that's another path that you don't want to go down.

- If you place your identity in money, you'll never have enough
- If you place your identity in an attractive body, your body will eventually age and break down
- If you accomplish a feat like a school record or a ground-breaking invention, someone will break your record and invent something bigger and faster.

Nothing in this world is worthy of placing your identity in...the identity simply will not last.

We don't have time to read the whole parable, but in Luke 16, Jesus gives us a picture of a rich man who did not place his identity in Jesus, but rather rejected Him.

The rich man's life ends and Jesus describes eternity for this man as "full of torment, anguish and pleading for pity".

Being OF the world is clearly a lifestyle that will result in misery and a lack of fulfillment.

But **an identity that is linked to the saving grace of Jesus will result in an awareness of how much we're loved.** We're loved no matter what, but an awareness of that love is needed in order to love others effectively.

As I wrap up, I want to prove to you what God really thinks of you. There are countless places in Scripture to pull from in order to do this, but here are a few:

- Jer. 31:3 – "I have loved you with an everlasting love." (He will never stop loving us)
- Romans 5:8 – "While you were a sinner, I died for you." (He isn't waiting for us to get everything right. He loves us NOW and He's waiting for us to respond.)
- Song of Songs 8:6-7 – "All the waters in the world cannot contain my love for you. Even the strongest currents in the rivers cannot wash away my love."

And this brings us back to 1 John, chapter 4 again. John addresses his audience in verse 11, saying “Dear friends, since God has loved us that much, we surely ought to love one another.”

Do you see the effects of observing **the perfect love of Jesus**? It’s not just a feel-good strategy for us...**it’s a game changer that inspires us to pass it on.**

Jesus loves us, pursues us and offers us an identity that will never fade.

Staying focused on a love like that will bring us the greatest fulfillment we could ever experience on this earth.

And once again, if we know how much we’re loved, there will be this enthusiasm deep within us that lives to love our neighbors in the same way that Jesus does.

Let’s pray.