

## **Understanding the Message of 1 John: The New Perspective of Love**

### **By Bob Young**

It is easy to read the Bible without context. How often have you heard John 13 quoted--“love one another”—apart from the context that describes how Jesus demonstrated love through sacrificial service? In the larger context of the Upper Room discourse, Peter says, “I will lay down my life for you,” and Jesus says, “There is no greater love than that.” Jesus also says, if I may paraphrase, “Peter, frankly, you do not have any idea what you are saying.” Jesus’ message is this: genuine love means that you love one another in the same way and to the same extent that I have loved you. Not just love, but the kind of love you have for one another, is what will set you apart and make you recognizable as my followers. This is also John’s message in 1 John 3:16: we should be willing to lay down our lives for other Christians just as Jesus laid down his life for us.

Again, how often have you heard John 13 quoted as though it was a broad generalization that speaks about the necessity of universal love? Undoubtedly Christ-followers will seek to imitate Jesus in his love for the world, but it is less than clear that the context of John 13 points to this broad definition of love as a primary characteristic of Christ’s disciples.

When we come to 1 John, John makes clear that the primary love obligation is between Christians. Paul says we are to do good to all, but especially to those of the family of faith (Gal. 6:10). This is also the focus of 1 John, especially chapters 2-4, which I summarize in the paragraphs to follow.

#### **2:3-6**

Knowing God is evidenced by keeping his commandments. Obedience to his word (keeping his commandments) is an evidence of love. (That the love of God is perfected has two possibilities: our obedience perfects our love for God; our obedience completes or perfects God’s purpose in loving us.) This paragraph says that the first dimension of love is obedience—evidence of the love relationship between God and humans.

#### **2:7-11**

This verse (7) has mystified many. John says that what he is writing is not new, but is new. What does he mean? It is the same command, but it is new because that which God has purposed through the centuries is coming to pass. This old command is finding new fulfillment and is being shown to be true because light is shining and darkness is being destroyed. The command is being fulfilled in the light of Jesus’ presence and example.

The newness of the command is seen in how it was lived out by Jesus’ sacrifice of himself, and by redefined relationships between Christians. Light demands love; light demands the kind of love that places no stumbling blocks. Hatred is opposed to the light. Hatred between Christians is impossible when one understands what the old commandment was intended to accomplish.

#### **2:12-17**

Those to whom John writes have experienced the realities of God’s purpose—forgiveness, knowledge of God, power over evil, a new perspective.

The new perspective that has come through Jesus' living demonstration of the commandment makes clear that the perspective of the world is flawed. The world thinks hate and opposition, conflict and rejection, are normal. The world's definition of love and God's definition of love are not only different, they are incompatible. The world is competitive, fueled by desires, and characterized by arrogance. In the world, building relationships of agape love is not all that normal.

2:18-3:10

This new perspective is also made evident in the coming of Jesus the Christ, sent from God. The new message that reflects this new perspective has been declared and taught. God's love has been revealed in his willingness to call human beings his children. God's love is revealed in his willingness to make us like him and to protect us from sinning.

3:11-24

The new perspective is essential to the gospel. Brotherly love replaces hatred. The world will never understand this perspective. The world will continue to hate those it perceives as enemies. Only Christians can love one another enough to destroy enmity and find peace. Christians love like Jesus loved. Christians love one another compassionately, sacrificially meeting the needs each of the other. (This is evident beginning in Acts 2, in various texts throughout the New Testament, and in church history from the early centuries of Christianity.) A good question to pose to members of any church is this, "Do you feel loved?" This new love perspective does not merely pay lip service; it acts.

John returns to the primary evidences of love: keeping his commandments, doing what pleases him, believing in the name of Jesus, and loving one another as Christians.

4:1-6

The God perspective is infinitely stronger than the world perspective, even as the power for living as a Christian is stronger than the world's energy. The world never understands it or accepts it. There will always be opponents; but they can be overcome. The opponents speak from the world's perspective and the world listens to them. The world's perspective does not know how to appreciate and accept disagreements.

4:7-5:3

Because God is love, we love one another. We have the Spirit, and therefore we have the perspective, teaching, and viewpoint of God. We understand love in a new way—love that seeks the wellbeing of another. This love which God has toward us is the love that we share with other Christians. Without such love, the epitome of the new commandment, we cannot love God or please God.

To love God means to keep his commandment. Loving God and keeping his commandments is evidence that we love God's children and family, our brothers and sisters in Christ. We love because we share God as father. We share the God perspective, totally distinct from the viewpoint of the world.

## Summary and Conclusion

How does one live out the new perspective based on love?

- Obedience to his word that lives out his purpose in the world
- Develop a self-sacrificing attitude that governs relationships with good will, celebrates openness and the transparency of light, and works toward the best for others.
- Reject the world's perspective. Hatred, opposition, conflict, and rejection—these fuel competitiveness, selfish desires, and arrogance. The world does not see relationships built on love as normal.
- Purify yourself because God in his love wants to make us like him and to protect us from sinning.
- Cultivate the primary evidences of love: keeping his commandments, doing what pleases him, believing in the name of Jesus, and loving all other Christians.
- Be confident in the overcoming power of the new perspective and live it out consistently.
- Understand with the presence of God's Spirit the new perspective that seeks the best for others, imitating the love God has for us, a love we share with other Christians.
- A primary indicator of our imitation of God and willingness to follow his commands is seen in our attitude toward and support of other Christians.