

# BELPRES CHURCH

## TWO FACTOR AUTHENTICATION

1 John 3:11-4:21

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Let's pray. Holy Spirit, help us to receive Your life-giving Word and put it into practice in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I'm Scott Mann, one of the pastors here, and I want to welcome all of you to worship and especially those of you joining us online and our youth. We're so glad you're all with us. I grew up with two families that profoundly shaped who I am. I was born to a mom, dad, sister, and a larger extended family, all of which was pretty close by. My second family is God's family. My parents believe deeply that raising kids is a partnership with the church. I say they were very wise, they say they were terrified of screwing up. I saw my parents and aunts and uncles expand their families through adoption and foster care, as well as opening their homes to teens in tough situations. Whether extended families are large or small, distant or close by, we are shaped by our families. No matter how imperfect they may be, it's in our families primarily that we learn we are loved and we learn how to love.

And the same is true of God's family, the church. I grew up being loved by all ages of amazing Christians in childcare, and Sunday school, and youth group, mission trips, and choir. You name it, my parents took me to it. My two families were a great example of how to love Christian brothers and sisters of all sorts, and eventually how to love our larger Christian family in other parts of the world. Well, we're in the midst of our sermon series Working Through How We Can be All In Disciples of Jesus. The most important thing about following Jesus is love. It all starts with believing that God loves you. Once you believe that, even just a little, Jesus makes very clear what comes next. Jesus said, the greatest commandment is what? Love God. That's right. And the second is like it, love your neighbor. That's right. Love your neighbor as yourself. So at Belpres, we try to focus on the most central truths, God loves you. We should love God in return and love our neighbors. But Jesus didn't leave it there. He said to His disciples, "A new command I give you love one another."

All the New Testament authors encourage this. They all encouraged the early church to do this, but no one emphasized it as much as the Apostle John. Today we focus on love within the body of Christ, disciples of Jesus love one another. The Apostle John is careful to define what he means since even back then, people had all kinds of ideas about what it means to love. John roots us in God's example, he says, "This is how we know what love is, Jesus Christ laid down His life for us." He says, "This is how God showed His love among us, by sending His Son that we might live through Him." We love because God first loved us. God cares for us, and then God acts to help us. So love has two essential factors. What

happens inside us, we care. And what we do about it, we act. Love is the marriage of compassion and action. Recently, a friend of mine shared some bad news with me and my immediate reaction was my guts wrenched, I had a very physical reaction. Now, different languages capture this universal, visceral nature of compassion.

The Greek word here is a great word [foreign language 00:04:34], it's a guts word. It means, "My organs moved toward him." In Chinese, I'm told, "My intestines broke into small inches." That's what they tell me. The Bible repeatedly uses this word and it says God feels deeply toward us. He has compassion for us, and then He helps practically. John's first letter here is only four short chapters long, but he uses the word "agape", sacrificial love 43 times. Jesus' youngest disciple, John, is now over 70 years old and he knew people needed to hear over and over about God's love. It's the most important thing in the world. John defines God's love here by four times pointing to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross to bring us back to God. If you have any doubts that God loves you, He came and died to prove it. That's the second factor of love. Love actively sacrifices for the benefit of the other, that's the kind of love John is talking about. It's not authentic love without two factors, caring for the other and acting for their benefit.

So John has defined his terms. Next, we might expect John to focus on what this looks like. How exactly do we love one another? He does mention that and I'll get to it, but what really surprised me when I studied this passage is what John focuses on. Instead of spending time detailing how our sacrificial love should benefit others, he explores how it benefits us. Is this because his hearers were consumer Christians asking, "What's in it for me?" No. They were people just like us under a lot of cultural and religious pressures, and they needed reassurance. So pastor John gave it. More than nine times in just this passage alone, John says, "This is how we know ..." something. He repeatedly points to real acts of love and then says they ground our faith. Now, John's onto an important spiritual dynamic here. When we love others sacrificially like God, we believe more deeply in God. Our belief drives our obedience and our obedience authenticates our beliefs. And Jesus' brother, James mirrors this idea.

He says, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food, if one of you says to him, 'Go in peace, be warm and well fed.' But does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action is dead. John and James say we need both faith and active love working together. So John lists several benefits that we receive when we sacrificially love, assurance of salvation, assurance of forgiveness and freedom from judgment, assurance of God's Spirit living within us, the promise of becoming more and more like Jesus, freedom from fear, a deeper relationship with God. And John goes on. So loving our sisters and brothers benefits us, it also authenticates our Christian witness to the world. Jesus Himself said, "By this will everyone know that you are My disciples, if you love one another." John makes clear that when we love one another, we authenticate the gospel. It's not enough to believe in Jesus, we have to sacrificially serve one another so outsiders can see the reality of the gospel at work.

This is how early Christianity so quickly turned the world right side up. Unbelievers saw how Christians loved one another and loads of people were attracted to following Jesus. What would it take for the world to recognize Christians by how well we demonstrated love? What would you sacrifice to get that result? So loving one another benefits me, it benefits our Christian witness, and of course it benefits the one being shown love. John uses very strong language to emphasize this point, "If anyone has material possessions and sees a Christian in need but has no pity, how can the love of God be in that person?" Meaning it can't. The Greek here is clear. John goes on, "Whoever does not love their Christian brother

or sister cannot love God. Let us not love with words alone but with actions and in truth." The Protestant reformer, John Calvin, interpreted this passage to mean exactly what it says. You see, if you see a Christian in need and you have the means to help, you are bound to help. Now, Christians in John's time were much more connected with one another, often living near each other and in smaller communities.

Needs were more well known and Christians commonly shared food and other possessions with one another. We know the early church used its offering to help Christians in need in their local church as well as in the broader church. Our culture is far more disconnected where we may not know each other, we may live quite a distance. It's more common for us to give money to the church, which then helps people in need as needs become known. So let me say thank you. Your financial giving to Belpres helps us provide basic necessities to Christians in our church ... and we have those, as well as to Christians in our community and around the world. Your giving is one way, you are already loving one another. Well, there is no real mystery here, the early disciples simply obeyed. They loved one another very practically and the church exploded exponentially among poor and rich, slave and free, including many ethnic groups. And the same thing has happened all throughout history.

If we are serious about wanting Jesus to revive us and the East side, loving one another is going to be a big part of how that will happen. In our church, we have many people who are great examples of this. I think of a man in our church in the nine o'clock service usually who needed a kidney or he was going to die. One of our church elders heard about his need, she donated her kidney and literally saved his life. They both inspire me. I think of a woman here who like all of us has a family and a job and a full schedule, but she simply watches for new people God puts in her path. She shows care and curiosity, and sometimes she ... God prompts her to provide a need for that person. But often she can't meet the person's need, so she asks for prayer and then she tries to connect that person to someone who will help. She has the most fun adventures seeing God provide and bless everybody involved. She experiences the deeper, richer, abundant life that Jesus wants for all of us.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking, "If loving others means I have to talk to strangers God puts in my path, I'd rather donate a kidney." We hear you. Full disclosure, loving one another does cost us in different ways. Sometimes loving someone hardly seems like a sacrifice at all, and other times it's big. It's like carrying a cross. Now, the Bible doesn't say I need to help everyone in the world. It doesn't say that. It says when I have the resources to help and I see someone in need, Jesus expects me to care and to help. So what might this look like in our daily discipleship? You've asked for more concrete examples of how to be all in, so here are a bunch to just get us thinking, but ultimately you and the Holy Spirit need to decide what's right for you. Let me just say the Holy Spirit will not dump a truckload of obligation on your head, that's just not how it works. Usually the Spirit will only lead you one next step at a time, it might be quite small or it might be a bigger change for you.

And some of you will likely sense God saying, "Well done, you love others well, keep up the good work." So many in our church are really good at loving one another. So the first step for all of us is to pray and then review your normal routines, commuting, having lunch, working out, going to church, whatever. How can you simply incorporate into what you're already doing connecting with another Christian? Being an all in disciple doesn't always mean a huge change in our primary commitments, but rather adjustments in how we do them. How can you watch for the people and the needs God puts in your path? What if you saved one day a week to have lunch with a Christian like we heard our high school

students are doing on campus? For most of us, this would not add to our schedule, but just adjust how we spend one lunchtime. My friend, Brian, often uses his commute home in the evening to call friends. So every couple of weeks I get a call and I feel loved and much more connected to his whole family.

Lots of us pray while we drive, prayer is a great way to love one another. Pray for brothers and sisters that come to your attention, people from work, or church, or in the news, or a maybe a missionary newsletter that you get at home. Young families often don't have a lot of time or money or sleep, but they can offer trade play dates. Lots of folks here enjoy doing that as a practical way to love other parents. Part of loving one another is rejoicing and mourning with one another. Many of our new hope families continue to lose family members to violence in the Congo, thank you for mourning with them and praying for them. Other examples of adjustments that you could make in our church family, could you pause after worship and not run to your car and just have a brief conversation with a worshiper near you? Or have coffee with someone in the lobby? When you come to church, could you take a turn as an elder, as an usher? Or stay for an extra service to give back to your church family?

Maybe God wants you to take a turn in our childcare or our Sunday school classrooms, loving our kids. Giving a little more time on Sunday morning when you're already here or Wednesday nights with our youth makes a huge difference for our church family. The Holy Spirit may prompt some of you to take a bigger step, maybe a small group commitment or something like that. Maybe your next step is for you to let your needs be known so that you can be loved. I've already heard from several of you who are focusing beyond Belpres on a Christian where you live, work, play, or learn. Above all, pray. Watch for opportunities and then obey the Spirit's promptings to show love. Finally, I can't close without mentioning one of the biggest reasons I think most of us struggle to show love for one another, distraction. For some of us, distraction is our biggest threat to discipleship. We fail to love one another sacrificially because we are consumed by other things. Our relationships, our goals, our schedules, our self-focus easily blind us to the needs in front of us. This is one of my biggest challenges.

My two families instilled in me the value of loving and serving. But even still, it is so easy to become focused on myself and to not take the time to love the people around me like I would like to. So I've learned to be intentional. I know many of us intentionally ask Jesus every morning to show us who needs love today. That is a great habit and I recommend it, but I've learned that for me it's not enough. I have to be even more intentional in forcing God's priorities into my life. Otherwise, the world distracts me and conforms me into its mold. Several years ago, I realized I was entering the sandwich generation where I wanted to spend more time with the kids in my life and with my parents and their generation. So I reviewed my calendar and my commitments, and I made some reductions to free up some time. I increased my budget for gas and airfare so I could increase my visits to people, and that really worked for me.

So now a couple times a year, I sit down and I review my calendar, my budget, and all of my closest people. It's not perfect, but I make a plan that forces God's priorities into my everyday life routines. Now, it's true that some of my friends ... okay, most of my friends give me a hard time for being so planned out. They want me to be more spontaneous, but I can show them every week, month, and quarter where I have planned time to be spontaneous. It's all built in. We are all so different, and being an intentional disciple of Jesus is going to look different for you. But we're all so similar, we all get distracted from God's loving purposes. The Holy Spirit will help you figure out what's going to work for you.

The Apostle John wrote this letter to emphasize the power of God's love to transform us, to transform others, and to transform our world. Beloved church, as Jesus has loved us, let us love one another.

Amen?

Amen.

Loving God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, help us to love like You love. Help us to be all in disciples of Jesus in our families, our church families, and in our world, You died to save. Amen.

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**Discussion Questions:** Read 1 John 3:11-4:21

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1. Why do you think John uses such strong language (hate, murder, liar, can't know God...) when discussing Jesus' new command to love one another? How does this make you feel?
2. In this section John sounds both challenging and reassuring. What does he say that reassures you of God's love for you even when you fail?
3. Notice how many times (9+) in this section John repeats the phrase, "This is how..." or "This is how we know..." To what does "this" refer in each instance? How does our practice of loving other Christians help us know/believe God's truths? How is your visible practice of love helping someone believe in an invisible God—who?
4. What hinders you in showing love to brothers and sisters in Christ? How can you overcome hindrances in order to love more as God loves even at cost to yourself?
5. What helps you love other Christians and what does that look like in your life right now? How could you demonstrate love to some Christian sisters and brothers suffering around the world?