

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – April 29, 2018

[1st John 4:7-21](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on 1st John 4:7-21

(From the *Homiletics* archive; “Love Lessons” – May 6, 2012)

Like much of the epistle of 1 John, 1 John 4:7-21 focuses heavily on the concept of the love of God and the implications of that love for the Johannine community to whom the epistle is directed. The author of the epistle opens this section in 4:7 by directly addressing his audience as “beloved,” a term of endearment which he frequently employs throughout the epistle (2:7, 3:2, 3:21, 4:1, 4:11). This term foreshadows the key theme of the passage: love. In fact, the author suggests that one test for the true knowledge of God is one’s ability to love: “everyone who loves ... knows God.” The suggestion that love leads to the knowledge of God would stand in opposition to Gnosticizing tendencies which would claim that that knowledge of God can only come through the acquisition of secret information.

Unlike such gnostic notions, the author of the epistle in verse 8 openly shares with his audience the essence of the divine, namely, love. This clear statement, “God is love,” is similar to the author’s earlier distinct statement in 1:5 that “God is light.” In both cases, it seems that rather than trying to provide an all-encompassing definition of God, the author is rather hinting at only certain attributes of God. Nonetheless, the definitive statement that God is love serves to undergird much of the text that follows, including the exposition of God’s love in verse 9 in which the author suggests that God’s sending of his son serves as a proof of his love. The notion of the son being the “only” (μονογενῆ) son is a familiar one to readers of the gospel of John, where the same term is frequently used as a descriptor of Jesus (1:14, 1:18, 3:16, 3:18). The author of the epistle goes on in verse 10 to specify just what sort of role this only son played: that of an “atoning sacrifice” (ἱλασμον). The usage of this word here and in 2:2 of the epistle are the only times the word appears in the NT.

In verse 11, the author repeats his pet name for the epistle’s audience, “beloved.” As in verse 7, the author issues the imperative for his audience to love one another. The author reassures his audience that despite the fact that neither they, nor anyone else, has ever seen God, by loving one another they guarantee the in-dwelling of God in their midst. Furthermore, this mutual love allows for the perfection or completion of God’s love. The notion that God’s love might be perfected has led some commentators on this text to be nervous that it could imply that God’s love was ever “imperfect.” However, the word used here (τετελειωμενη) often refers more to an expected end or fulfillment than a “perfection” per se. In the gospel of John, for example, the same verb is used to refer to the fulfillment of Scripture (19:28). Thus, the use of this word here need not imply any imperfection in God’s love, but rather a fulfillment of it.

The first part of verse 13 opens with the phrase “by this we know we abide in him” However, it is not entirely clear whether the “this” referenced here refers to what precedes it (God living and perfecting love

in us) or to what follows (God's giving from his Spirit). This ambiguity, however, does not matter insofar as the author's message remains clear: God abides in those who love. In verse 15, the author further clarifies that God also abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God. One may wonder whether this indicates a rift between the Johannine community and other communities in which such a confession was deemed unnecessary or inaccurate.

Verse 17 introduces an element of eschatology with the mention of the "day of judgment." Although the theme of judgment is a relatively frequent one in the gospel of John (5:22-30, 7:24, 8:16, 12:31), it seems rather misplaced in this epistle of John in which love, not judgment, serves as a central focus. Nonetheless, the first part of this verse connects it well with the theme of the completion or perfection of God's love, which was already explored in verse 12 of this chapter as well as earlier in the epistle in 2:5. The author of the epistle explores this connection between eschatological judgment and love further in verse 18 as he explains that perfect/complete love has nothing to do with fear or punishment. The term used for punishment here (*κολασιν*) is a rare one in the NT and only otherwise appears in Matthew 25:46. The context in Matthew suggests that the punishment envisioned is of the eternal variety. Thus, it seems likely that even though the author of the epistle does not specify that the punishment he is referencing is eternal in nature, based on the context of this word's usage in Matthew, it may not be too much of a stretch to assume that the author is referring to eternal punishment here.

Verse 19 presents the translator with a difficulty as the verb "love" (*αγαπωμεν*) could either be translated as an indicative verb ("we love," as in the NRSV and many other English translations) or as a hortatory subjunctive ("let us love"). The former translation implies a cause-and-effect relationship between God's love and human love. The latter adopts the familiar imperative to love, which was already issued in verse 7. Because either translation could plausibly fit well here, it is difficult to decide which the author intended. Nonetheless, regardless of which translation is chosen, the author's basic point remains the same: that there is a close connection between human and divine love.

Finally, in verse 20, the author presents the upshot of all of this discussion on love by means of an *minore ad maius* argument. If the Christians who are his audience are not able to love humans who they can see, the author asks, how could they possibly be able to love God who, as has been shown in verse 12, is unseen? Thus, the author convincingly cinches his argument for the necessity of reciprocal love within the Johannine Christian community.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?