

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

May 17-23, 2020

Sermon Series: U R The Church

Week Four: “Mission is the Mission”

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week’s Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday’s sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Almighty God, You have created us, called us, and chosen us to be Your people. We wait now to receive Your word of guidance and blessing. Grant unto us ears to hear, eyes to see, and faith to respond to Your love and leadership. In the name of Christ, Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

Where is God leading us as a church? In light of what we’ve gone through as a community/country/world, what are the ways God is moving us to be a new or renewed church?

This Week’s Sermon Theme:

How can the church be high touch in a hands-off world? How does the church create opportunities to be in real mission with others? We continue our ongoing Signature Missions, but also the new personal missions we’ve all gravitated toward in our isolation – things like caring for our neighbors and meeting them! Calling others before making our grocery run, for the homebound. We move toward neighborliness that transforms neighborhoods.

Sunday Scripture Reading: 1 John 4:7-13 (A group member should read the passage aloud). Please note that this Scripture reading is from the letter called “First John,” and not the “Gospel of John”!

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

Why is loving each other a primary thing we should all do? (4:7a)

What two attributes of relationship with God are shared by those who love? (4:7b)

Can someone who does not love know God? Why? (4:8)

How does God show God’s love for us? (4:9)

Why did God send us His Son? (4:9b)

What demonstrates love best – our love for God, our God’s sacrificial gift of His Son? (4:10)

What is the primary reason we should love one another? (4:11)

What is the best way for others to see God, when no one can actually “see” God? (4:12)

How can we KNOW that we share intimate relationship with God? (4:13)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Questions are suggestions, but open discussion is encouraged. These are “I wonder” questions that the group might want to pursue together.

We see people who seem to “love each other” all the time, even if they are not Christians or even Godly non-Christians. We might wonder how John can say that anyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

We might also wonder at the comment “God is love” – is “God” really just a name for an abstract idea called “love”?

We might ask how we are supposed to emulate love that is defined by “sending His son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins”?

What would it mean to love one another IN THAT WAY, which is what the passage asks us to do?

We probably wonder, how exactly can love be made “complete” or “perfect” in us?

Can people really “see God” by seeing us love each other the way John wants us to?

Are human beings really capable of that?

We may want to know, how does the gift of the Spirit give us the kind of confidence in God’s presence that John writes of?

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: 1 John 4:4-6; John 15:19; 1 John 3:13; 1 John 2:3; John 4:24; 1 John 1:5

The overarching message of this week’s passage is this: Love is the defining characteristic of everyone who is “born of God.” Since God is love in God’s very nature, when we love, God’s nature shines through us.

But beneath this primary message lies a greater issue that is not as immediately evident. As the previous passage (1 John 4:4-6) shows, one of the things John is primarily concerned about here is for his readers to understand their need to differentiate false prophets from true Christians. The real Christian is the one who gives evidence of their faith by loving others the way God loved the world in sending Christ to the world to save them. False prophets are those who say one thing, but truly only love

“their own” (see Gospel of John 15:19), and who actually hate the true believers (Letter of 1 John 3:13). John also encourages his readers that if they are among the true believers, they must love one another in this way, or they will not be recognizable as true believers by the community of faith.

The reason love can be the great discriminator between false prophet and true believer is that love is the very nature of God. But it is a very specific kind of love – the kind of love that will sacrifice everything, even one’s own Son, to save others. When this kind of love is truly exhibited by a human being, it really does serve as evidence that the person is “born of God and knows God.” This is because it is not human nature to love in this way. The only way it is possible is that God’s love is shining through them. We can truly recognize that someone is born of God when they act with this kind of love.

But John does not only write of people being “born of God” when they exhibit love, but he writes of them “knowing God” as well. To “know God” in this context means to share in lasting, eternal, fellowship with God. The only way we can love as God loves is to have entered into intimate fellowship with God, so that we truly share in this divine nature by being one with God. If the false prophets out there who claim an intimate, direct knowledge of God’s will, and are using that to coerce people to their own philosophies, do not love as God loves, they clearly do not “know” God – they don’t share in God’s divine nature of love, or else it would flow forth from them.

What does it mean to say that “God is love”? Throughout history, some people have used the verse “God is love” as a sort of New Testament commentary on the difference between the “God of the Old Testament” (stern and tyrannical) and the “God of the New Testament” (compassionate and loving). But this is far from the case. Throughout the letter of 1 John up to these verses, John has written of the need to keep God’s commandments (see 2:3 for the first of many such references). Rather, in writing “God is love,” John is simply identifying the basic fact that humanity must choose between two alternatives – the world of the false prophets (a world of unbelief and hatred) and the world of God (a world of faith, obedience, and love). God is not hatred, God is love. As such, children of God love, while children of the devil hate. We emulate the nature of the one we are in league with. We should take note that elsewhere, John has also written that “God is Spirit” (John 4:24) and “God is light” (1 John 1:5). Each description of God’s nature conveys something about God’s uniqueness and, especially, about God’s distinctiveness from the created order.

What is important in the Christian gospel, here, is that the full nature of this love of God has only now been revealed to the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The fact that God’s nature is love has only now become fully evident. Now, we know clearly who God is – God is the One Who Loves. While this has always been true, it has only become supremely evident in the coming of Christ, who not only lived a life that demonstrates God’s complete love, but passed the ability to live a life of love on to His followers. The perfect revelation of God’s love, and the perfect expression of God’s love within humanity could only be brought about by an act of God – it is not something we could bring about by our own efforts. As a human being, Jesus both demonstrated it for humanity, and empowered humanity to emulate it. This is what makes Christianity unique. Humanity has only truly known what love is since the sending of God’s Son. Only in Jesus has humanity experienced love in all its fullness.

The upshot is this – the love of God as revealed in Jesus is to be the pattern for Christian behavior. Christian faith is not about outward show, or claims of direct knowledge of God, but the demonstration of love in action toward others. What’s more, it is only by loving others as God loves us that we can stay in true fellowship with God or “knowledge” of God. God has even loved us enough to ensure that we

can be confident of our relationship with God through His gift of the Holy Spirit. Complete love, perfect love, is different from the love we can see in the world without Christ. Perfect, complete love is seen in the way Christians love each other with God's self-giving love.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

How have the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis forced you to change what "love in action" looks like in your life?

Do you feel like your life is more organized around your own selfish desires, or around how you can sacrificially love others?

Do you think others see God when they see you loving others? How is your life making God visible to others?

Who do you think God is encouraging you to love? Are there opportunities for you to expand the range of specific people you can demonstrate God's love to?

In the future, when the COVID-19 crisis is behind us, will you be able to look back on this time and see new ways you chose to demonstrate love? Or will you use it to make excuses for why you couldn't serve other people the way you wanted to?

What does loving each other look like for you, when the ways you are used to demonstrating love are no longer possible?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Holy God, help us to love others as You love us. Show us the places in our lives where we have opportunities to demonstrate real sacrificial love. Through the power of Your Holy Spirit, hold us in fellowship with You, and allow others to see You in us. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, who showed us what complete and perfect love looks like. Amen.