

“Love”

1 John 3:15–18; 1 John 2:1–2; 1 John 4:17–19
(NRSV)

Community, Cross, and New Creation: Love? Is it really all we need?

This week we turn to the apostle John’s letter we know as 1 John. The accompanying text box will give you an overview of the letter. We continue focusing on New Testament writings using three focal images proposed by Richard Hays in his book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*: community, cross, and



1 JOHN

1 John was one of the last NT books to be written, perhaps very close to the end of the first century. Though 1 John is usually referred to as a letter, it is more like a pastoral treatise written to confront false teachers and prophets in the Christian community. Compared to the logic and argument that characterizes much of Paul’s letters, this essay is much more like a musical composition. It is tightly and simply written. C. Clifton Black writes, “[1 John] doesn’t just convey information; it does something to the listener. . . we do not interpret 1 John. It interprets us.”

Augustine noted that 1 John points us toward little else than love. It is love that expresses the nature of God, who revealed his love for us by the gift of his Son, for “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (1 John 3:16). In 4:7-12, John gives us a virtual theology of love. Through it all, love is never simply good feelings toward another. Love is action. We cannot claim to love God and turn our back on others. It is through loving others that we come to know and love God.

new creation.

The three passages from 1 John were chosen to help us see each image in John’s letter.

The irony is that 1 John seems to be all about love, yet love is not one of Hay’s three images. He acknowledges this in his book, noting that there are substantial portions of the New Testament where the word “love” is not found. But, more importantly, Hays recognizes that “love” is not an image but the interpretation of an image. Do you want to know what love really is? Paul would tell you look to the *cross* – that’s what love is.

Finally, in our culture “love” has come to mean so many things and is used so freely and frequently that it means nothing. When we come to the New Testament, we must begin by confronting the contextual meaning of *agape*, one of several Greek words for “love.” *Agape* is used almost exclusively in the New Testament.

Love? Much more than affection

In our culture, “love” has become a word that is used so freely, to express so many different ideas and feelings, that it has become almost useless. As I have told you before, I “love” God, I “love” my family, I “love” my dog, I “love” peanut butter (ok, I do!). Because we use the word in so many ways, let’s take a another brief look at the biblical use of the word “love.”

As Kittel¹ notes, in the Old Testament, our love for God is focused on the delight and joy we find in God. Our love for God is our seeking after God himself. Our love for God is bound up with our obedience. Those who love God are those who keep his commandments (Deuteronomy 5:10), serve him, and walk in his ways (Deuteronomy 10:12). At the same time, our love for God is to be an internal matter, an affair of the heart (Jeremiah 31:33). Much more than simply affection for God or others, love encompasses the whole person – our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

¹ Much of the material in this section is from Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (abridged by G. Bromily)

God's love is focused on his people, as a nation or community, more than on any specific individual. God's love for his people is manifested in his relentless pursuit of Israel despite their endless abandonment of him and the covenant. The story of Hosea gives concrete expression to God's unfathomable, incomprehensible love for the people he has chosen. God instructs Hosea that he is to love and marry a whore, Gomer, and continue loving her, no matter what she does to shame and dishonor him. God loves Israel and Hosea is to love Gomer – regardless!

In the New Testament, Jesus builds on the Old Testament understanding of love but makes it completely unconditional. Our love for God represents total commitment and trust. Our love for neighbor is extended to all humanity and cannot be separated from our caring for the marginalized in our society. Jesus even makes clear that our love for neighbor is extended to our enemies – all are included!

Luke tells us that Jesus was once approached by a lawyer who asked him what he must “do to inherit eternal life.” Jesus asked the lawyer what was written in the law and the lawyer replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (see Luke Chapter 10). Jesus told the lawyer he had answered correctly. But of course, being a lawyer, the man asked Jesus “who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied by telling a story, the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this story, a Jewish man, lying injured by the side of the road, was refused help by a priest and then a Levite,² only to be helped by a Samaritan, who was the true neighbor. It is hard for us to grasp how shocking this story would have been to the good Jews listening to Jesus. It would be as if Jesus told the story in an Israeli café today, with an Israeli schoolgirl lying injured, refused help by a Rabbi and an Israeli soldier, only to be helped by a member of Hamas!³ You see, the Jews of Jesus' day despised the Samaritans, holding them to be little better than dogs. Jesus' listeners might have been angered by the story, but they would have grasped the depth and universality of God's command to love their neighbors.

Twenty years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection, the apostle Paul wrote a letter to churches he had founded in Galatia, which was in modern-day Turkey. In much of this letter, Paul is quite angry with these churches because it seems that they have returned to the idea that they are made right with God by keeping the Sabbath or circumcising their male children. Instead, Paul writes, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.”

Love as Caring

Our love is to be a practical love, a love not only of the heart, but of the hands. In the New Testament, the word most commonly translated “love” is *agape*. *Agape* does not necessarily connote warm affection.⁴ Instead, it conveys sacrificial love, focused on acts of mercy and caring. In the above passage from 1 John (3:17-18), we are called to love our brothers and sisters and, indeed, this love for neighbor is bound up with our love for God – they cannot be separated. We cannot hate our brothers or sisters and still claim to love God.

In the first years following Jesus' death and resurrection, the early Christian community in Jerusalem lived out the self-giving love to which Jesus had called them by caring for the needy, especially widows. Not surprisingly, as the community grew, this caring ministry grew also, putting ever-larger burdens on the time and resources of the twelve apostles. The apostles realized that, because of the time pressures, they were neglecting the preaching of God's word in order to care for the needy. Knowing that their devotion to God and his word was bound up with their love for and caring of others, the apostles decided to enlist helpers to assume responsibility for the caring ministry. To reiterate, love is first and foremost what we do.

² Priests served in the temple, the center of Jewish worship. Their highest duty was to offer sacrifices. Levites assisted in the maintenance of temple services

³ The shocking nature of this parable is from John Crossan's, *The Dark Interval*. 1988. Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press

⁴ There is another Greek word, *phileo*, which more strongly carries the notion of warm affection for another. Yes, Biblical Greek has lots of words.

Community, Cross, and New Creation in 1 John

The three passages from 1 John at the top of the study were chosen to help us see the three focal images in practice. The first passage (1 John 3:15–18) reminds us that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, we are a **community** that has forsworn murder (one dramatic example of sin) and embraced those in need. We are a community of love. In fact, all three images can be seen in these four verses: “he laid down his life,” the **cross** and “eternal life,” the **new creation**.

The second passage (1 John 2:1–2) points us directly to the **cross**, referring to Jesus as the “atoning sacrifice.” In other words, through Jesus’ sacrifice of his life, he has made us “at-one” with God, reconciling the relationship of humanity and God that was torn apart by human rebellion in the garden (Genesis 3). This reconciliation is the overarching story of God’s work in this world, told through the pages of Scripture.

“Boldness on the day of judgment” in the third passage (1 John 4:17–19) refers to the consummation of the **new creation** and the fulfillment of all God’s promises. Being Christ’s, we know that though we will be judged, our names are written in the book of life (Revelation 20), ensuring that we will enjoy eternity with God and one another.

Finally -- going about the use of Scripture

Part of our hope for this series is that we might all become better readers of Scripture. The tough problem is that the Bible can be, and has been, used to support almost any notion imaginable. So, the question is, how can we use the Bible, our agreed authority, to guide us and instruct us? In *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Richard Hays suggests that we have a fourfold task when we come to the Bible (the quoted material is all from Hays’s book). I’ve used this simple approach for many years and have found it be enormously helpful.

The descriptive task: reading the text carefully

“The first thing we must do in order to understand the ethics of the New Testament is to explicate and explain in detail the messages of the individual writings in the canon, without prematurely harmonizing them.”

The synthetic task: placing the text in the canonical context

“Is it possible to describe a unity of ethical perspective within the diversity of the canon?”

The hermeneutical task: relating the text to our situation

“[How can we bridge] the temporal and cultural distance between ourselves and the text? . . . How do we appropriate the New Testament’s message as a word addressed to us?”

The pragmatic task: living the text

“The final task of New Testament ethics is the pragmatic task: embodying Scripture’s imperative in the life of the Christian community.”

Daily Bible Readings

(More from 1 John, as outlined by Clifton Black in the New International Bible)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday	1 John 1:1-2:6	Introit for eternal life
Tuesday	1 John 2:2-14	What I [John] am writing
Wednesday	1 John 2:15- 3:10	Children, this is the last hour
Thursday	1 John 3:11-5:12	The message you have heard from the beginning
Friday	1 John 5:13-21	That you may know you have eternal life
Saturday	Psalms 136	God’s steadfast love endures forever