

# OpenTheo

## God of Love - Part 1

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### **The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier**

John Stott explains why we will never truly know what it is to be a human being unless we know the God who made us and why there is a huge difference between knowing about God and knowing Him personally.

### **Transcript**

We human beings are not fully human, if we don't know God. I don't think that is the very least in exaggeration. A human being is a person made by God, like God, and for God in order to spend time and eternity with God.

And it is in this life with him, this personal knowledge of him that we find our humanness. We commenced the Bible for today six months ago with one of the earliest known recordings of John Stott preaching at all cells church in London. And in six months time we'll bring you the last sermon he ever preached there.

These messages are just a small chronological selection from a whole lifetime of preaching. And today at the halfway point we'll hear a message John gave it all to us in 1987. You can listen to all of John Stott's sermons by visiting their website.

It has been said that love is like the wind. You can't see it, you can only feel it. Well love is much more than a feeling.

One of the greatest attributes of Almighty God is love. And we can only truly know love when we know God through faith in Christ. This week John Stott brings us the first of two messages on the God of love.

You'll find it helpful to have your Bible open near the end of the New Testament to the first letter of John chapter four. Well we begin as has been mentioned a new series of sermons entitled "Knowing God". And I have very much that in the course of these weeks everybody will get a copy of Dr. J. I. Packer's little classic paperback with that very title "Knowing God".

I think you would find yourself immeasurably enriched by that little book. Then let's be clear at the beginning that we're not talking about an academic knowledge of God. As if we could presume to put God on our curriculum or make him a part of our syllabus of studies.

And that we should set him over there objectively and presume to scrutinize God. That is not the kind of knowledge that we are talking about. We are talking about the personal knowledge of God, the possibility of coming to know him in a personal and intimate way for ourselves.

Because Jesus said that this is the meaning of eternal life. Eternal life is that they may know you. He said speaking to God in prayer the only true God in Jesus Christ to me was sent.

It is a personal knowledge of God through Christ which is the meaning of life eternal. And indeed we human beings are not fully human if we don't know God. I don't think that is the very least in exaggeration.

A human being is a person made by God, like God, and for God in order to spend time and eternity with God. And it is in this life with him, this personal knowledge of him that we find our humanness. So for the next weeks we are taking six of the major attributes of God.

Our topic as you know today is the love of God. We go on next Sunday to the goodness of God and the truth of God and the justice and the grace and the faithfulness of God. But for this marvelous theme of the love of God, I would like to ask you to turn back to the second lesson.

It is in the New Testament section of the Church Bibles, the first letter of John chapter 4. And I want to read this time simply verses 7 to 12, their little paragraph. It is all about love and in particular the love of God. 1 John 4 verse 7, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love comes from God and he who loves is born of God and knows God.

He who does not love does not know God because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us that God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love not that we love God but that he loved us and sent his son to be better the propitiation or the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. Nobody has ever seen God but if we love one another God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. You've noticed every verse has a reference to love and the love that is in mind is the love of God.

Now the reasons why I felt that this is the right passage for us to study is first that it contains the only verse in Scripture with one other that comes in verse 16 a little later.

But the only verse in Scripture that affirms that God is love. So it seemed the right passage should take for that reason and the second is that it explains what knowing God is the love of God rarely means, knowing God as love.

I'm very anxious to enlarge on that at the beginning that the Bible is essentially a practical book. The Bible's main question is not philosophical. For example, when it is speaking about the love of God or God as love, it doesn't actually explain what it means that the very being of God could be loved or how it is that for the centuries of a past eternity even before there was a creation.

And before there were human beings on whom to set his love, God was still love and how that is possible is never actually explained. We think we understand that it is because God is Trinity and that the Father, the Son and the Spirit are joined together by the bonds of reciprocal love. But these philosophical questions about how God could be loved or indeed about how you can reconcile with the truth that God is loved, the prevalence of evil in the world.

These philosophical questions, the Bible doesn't answer because the Bible is a severely practical book. And what has struck me as I meditated on these verses is that although John affirms that God is love, he doesn't explore his affirmation. He doesn't unfold his affirmation.

Instead, he makes his affirmation the ground of an appeal to us to love one another. He isn't even interested in mystical experiences of those who claim to know God unless their knowledge of the God of love issues in love for one another. To claim to know God while we hate a brother or sister, he says he's simply a contradiction in terms.

If we hate people then are claimed to know God because he is love is bogus. So John's concern here is not to convince us that God is love. It is rather to persuade us that because God is love, we must love one another.

And there is no sense in talking about knowing God as the God of love unless there's issues in practical love for one another. Well, that's the theme and that's why I felt it was right to follow the theme in our study this morning. Well, that's how he begins in chapter 4 verse 7, "For love it let us love one another." He says it again in verse 11, "If God so loved us, we ought all settle love one another." He says it a third time in verse 12, "Nobody's ever seen God, but if we love one another three times he refers to the indispensable necessity of loving one another, and he grounds his exhortation to us to love one another on the love of God." Although as he goes on he develops his argument in very interesting ways.

So firstly, we ought to love one another because God is love and love is derived from him. Look again, will you at verses 7 and 8. "For love it let us love one another because love is of God and he who loves his born of God and knows God, and he who does not

love does not know God." So Christians are people who claim to have been born of God or begotten of God and who claim to know God. New birth and the knowledge of God are integral to being a Christian.

But the God we claim to know and the God we say has begotten us again is love. It follows therefore that if we have been begotten of God we will manifest the nature of the God who has begotten us again. Or again if we claim to know God we shall exhibit the love of the God we claim to know.

You see the logic of what John is saying. He puts it actually the same logic in two ways, both positive and negative. Positively he says everybody who loves has been born of God and knows God.

Negatively whoever does not love does not know God. I hope we can feel within us the irresistible logic of those statements. Mind you the love that he is talking about is not ordinary human love which binds together husband and wife, parent and child, brother and sister, friend and friend.

That kind of ordinary human love exists outside the Christian community and far beyond the community of those who have been born of God and know God. Because God has made all human beings in his own image and given all human beings the capacity to love and to be loved in that ordinary human sense. And Jesus made that clear in the Sermon on the Mount.

He said to his own followers, "If you only love those who love you, you'll know better than people outside the kingdom. People who are outside the redeemed community, they love those who love them. That kind of love is not restricted to those who are born of God and know God.

But the implication is there is another kind of love that is. It's not ordinary human love, it's divine love. It's the love of God.

It's the love that stoops and sacrifices and serves looking for no reward. It's the love that took Christ to the cross. It's the love of our enemies.

That is divine love and is possible only to those who have been born of God to whom he has imparted some of his own nature. So this love is the hallmark of genuine Christian men and women. Everybody who loves like that with the love of God has been born of God and knows God.

And whoever does not love with a love like that, a love that reaches out to the enemy, such a person does not know God. However much they may claim to, however orthodox they may be, however religious they may be. John says if they don't love with the love of God, they don't know him and they've never been born of him.

It's a very solemn statement. So that's the first thing. We ought to love one another because God is love and love comes from him.

And if we claim to know him and to have been born of him, then we must love as well. Then secondly, we ought to love one another, he says, because God has loved us in Christ. John turns from doctrine.

God is love to history. God has loved. He turns from the being of God as love to the activity of God who has loved us in Christ.

Verses 9 to 11. In this the love of God was made manifest that God sent his own son into the world that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins.

And beloved, if God has loved us like that in giving his son to die for us, we ought also to love one another. Well the words that are common to both statements and verses 9 and 10 is the words that God sent his son. He has shown his love for us in giving and sending his son in order that we might live through him and in order that he might be the propitiation for our sins.

Now that shows us that the love of God is not sloppy or soft or sentimental love. It's not unprincipled love. It's not love that is prepared to condone evil or compromise with sin.

No, the love of God is the strong love of his holiness. Divine love is holy love, determined to redeem us in righteousness without compromising his righteousness whatever the cost. John tells us that the cost of God in loving us like that was very great indeed because in sending and giving his dear and only son, he first took our nature upon him and was born in the womb of a lowly mother and then to take our sin judgment upon him in God for second darkness.

And it's because he died that we may live. It's because he bore our sin that God has propitiated his own roof against evil. We must never think of Christ as coming between us and God and propitiating a reluctant God who wasn't willing to do it himself.

No, that is absurd. The Bible never even begins to indicate that. The very opposite is said to us here that it is God in his own love who has propitiated his own roof by sending and giving his son to die for a sake is God in Christ, propitiating his roof by his love.

That's the mystery of the atonement. The wonder that God loved us enough to bear our sin and guilt and judgment in his own innocent person. So the first argument for our loving one another is because God is love in his being and all love derives from him.

The second argument is that God has loved us in the historical process in giving himself by giving his son to die for us. The third in a way is even more striking. And that is that we ought to love one another because then if we do, it is evident that God lives in us and

that his love is perfected in us.

Now that I suspend the rest of our time looking at verse 12, nobody has ever seen God. But if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. Nobody has ever seen God.

God is invisible. All men and women have ever seen of God is his glory, the outward shining of his inward being. But the inward being of God is invisible.

Nobody has ever seen him and nobody ever will. And the invisibility of God is a great problem. It is a great problem to faith.

The invisibility of God is a problem to the Jews in our Testament days. The surrounding nations had visible gods, that is idols. Their gods had eyes and ears and noses and mouths and feet and hands.

But the Jews worshipped an invisible God, which struck the pagans around them as a huge joke. And they used to tease the Jews about worshipping an invisible God. They came to them and said, "But you say you worship God.

Where is he?" We can't see him. Come to our temples and we will show you our gods. They've got noses and mouths and hands and feet and eyes and ears.

But you say you worship God. We can't see him. Ha ha ha.

And they laughed at the Jews for actually worshipping an invisible God. That's why several times in the Old Testament, a psalmist or a prophet will say, "Why should the nations say, 'Where is now your God?'" And that's why the Jews used to pray to God, "Rend the heavens, come down, show yourself, visit us so that the heathen will know that you are God." So you see, the invisibility of God was a great problem to the Jews. But the invisibility of God is a great problem at the end of the 20th century as well in our scientific culture.

You and I were brought up in an atmosphere of healthy skepticism. We were taught the empirical method. We were told that we cannot believe in anything that is not amenable to investigation by our five senses.

We were told to believe in what we can see and hear, touch and taste and smell. And if there are certain things people say they believe in that are not accessible to the five senses, we were brought up not to believe in them in skepticism. So young people come to us to dance, "But how can I believe in God?" I can't see him, hear him, taste him, touch him, smell him.

How can I believe in a God who is invisible and intangible and inaudible and everything else? So you see, the invisibility of God has always been a problem. So how has God

solved the problem of his own invisibility? You know the answer to that question? In two ways. First in Jesus Christ.

John 1, John's Gospel, chapter 1, verse 18. Nobody has ever seen God, but the only begotten of the Father, he has made him known. And a few verses earlier, John 1, 14, the Word became flesh.

The eternal Word of God became a human being, and we have seen his glory. The glory as of the only begotten of the Father. So Jesus was able to say a little bit later, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." And Paul could say that Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God.

Well people say that's marvelous. It's marvelous. And it's absolutely true, it's logical, it's wonderful, the claim that the invisible God made himself visible in Jesus.

The unknown God made himself known in Jesus. It's imminently reasonable. We could never have come to know God otherwise.

It's wonderful, but it's 2,000 years ago. Is there no way in which the invisible God makes himself visible today? Well yes there is. And this is John's second answer.

This text, verse 12, he begins with precisely the same words. The identical words nobody has ever seen God. But instead of going on the only begotten Son has made him known.

He says if we love one another, God dwells in us, and his love is perfected in us. I think it's one of the most breathtaking verses in the New Testament. Because it is a claim that the invisible God who once made himself visible in Christ now makes himself visible in Christians, in the Christian community, if, if, it is a community of love.

If we love one another, God dwells in us and his love is perfected in us. The invisible God has made himself visible through the person of Jesus Christ. You've been listening to the first part of a message by John's start on the God of love, which he'll continue at the same time next week.

If you would like to dig deeper into the letters of the Apostle John, you'll be interested in our book recommendation for this week by John's start. It's called The Letters of John, and you can find details on our website, which is regularly updated with new material to Mark John Stott's centenary. Just go to [premierchristianradio.com/JohnStott](http://premierchristianradio.com/JohnStott). The legacy of John Stott lives on and is growing, touching every level of society across the world.

Today, Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries, thanks to the vision of John Stott, who donated all his book royalties to support this ministry through Langham Partnership. To find out about this and other ministries, John Stott founded, go to [premier.org.uk/JohnStott](http://premier.org.uk/JohnStott). Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for

Today with John Stott.

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