

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Are you a Christian? Silly question, isn't it? You're here, so you must be a Christian, right? But let's think about this: what is a Christian? How would you define the term? Most would probably say, "A follower or disciple of Christ." Not a bad answer. How about a follow up question: can you identify a Christian just by observing their life? This is where we might struggle a bit. "Well, ideally sure. But maybe not always. What makes a person a Christian is faith in Christ and faith is in the heart where we can't see." Yeah, that's right. Good answer! I can't disagree.

But today, I want you to wrestle with something. Is that answer a little too simplistic? Is that answer sometimes given to appease our conscience because our life doesn't always line up with our confession? Could we listen carefully today and hear from God himself how he defines a Christian or a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ?

**13 We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. 16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. 17 In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. 18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.**

**13 We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.**

We know we live in him, and he in us because he has given us his Spirit.[The Spirit gives faith in Jesus, and through faith in Jesus God lives in you.]

**14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.**

Getting back to the objective truth about our salvation. We are in danger and in need of rescue. God sent his one and only Son who is true God from eternity to become man in order to rescue this lost and sinful world... and good news... that includes you!

**15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. 16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love.**

Do you believe that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world? If you do, then by faith, God lives in you, and you live in God. So our faith is in what? We know and rely on the love God has for us.

So as we consider all of this, what do we learn about a Christian? A Christian is not someone who believes in God. We need to get way more specific than that (otherwise Satan would be a Christian. He believes in God. He believes Jesus is God. But such faith does not save him.) What is saving faith? It is faith that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the world, and your personal Savior. It means believing that the

love of God is the sole cause and reason for our salvation. God loved us and saved us, independently of who we are and what we have done. God is love.

Okay, this is the necessary groundwork. We're seeing what it means to truly be a Christian.

**Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.**

Now stick with John here. This is so simple yet so profound and deep it's hard to wrap our minds around. If God gave you his Spirit, you trust that Jesus is the Son of God and your personal Savior. If that is true, then you live in God and God lives in you. And if God is love, then get this: Living in God means you live in love. And God living in you means love lives in you!

So while you can't see God with your eyes, nor can anyone else, we can see the love that overflows into our lives... and so can everyone else!

**17 In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him.**

If you live in God and God lives in you, it's only natural that you will look like God. What does it mean to look like God? Well, it doesn't mean that you will have the physical appearance of God since God is a spirit. Instead it means that you will be like him in love. Think about all you know about the love of God. Think especially about the incredible love of God shown when Jesus bled and died on the cross for your sins and mine, because that's where you see God's love most clearly. When that love is in you and you are in it, you will live it. And when you live it, God's love is made complete.

Honestly, here's where we sometimes fall short as Christians. We are recipients of God's love, but often the love stops there... or the love is restrained from there. We don't pour out that love in our life. We don't pour it out in our relationships with others. Yet that is God's will. Yes, he wants you to receive his love, but he doesn't want you to hoard it. You are to distribute it as generously and as frequently as he does. And as you do that, you gain confidence on the day of judgment. You see more and more outward evidence of the inward reality that is invisible: namely, God has taken residence inside of you, and you have taken residence inside him.

If only when we became a believer we would see our hearts visibly glowing brightly in our chest, kind of like the power source in the chest of Iron Man. Then we would see and have confidence that God is in us. And if only we could visible see a glowing sphere around... the presence of God. Then we could see and be confident that we are in God. But these things are invisible. Invisible, that is, until we live in love. That is, outwardly, in our regular interactions with others... at home, at work, at church, bumping into random strangers, the love of God pours out. NOW we can see it! Now we have outward evidence of God's love that is in us and evidence that we are in God who is love. Because look at how that love that has saturated me is now flowing out in my life! That, friends, gives us confidence on the day of judgment. When we see fruits of faith rooted in love, we have outward evidence of the inward reality.

**18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.**

Are you sometime afraid of God? Most people if they really stop and think about it, are afraid of God and what he will do to them. They're afraid to die and they're afraid of Judgment Day, because when they meet God they're not sure if he'll be smiling or frowning.

But perfect love drives out fear. What does that mean? If we love perfectly, then we'll have no more fear? No, that can't be right. We haven't loved perfectly and never will. We would always be afraid. The perfect love talked about here is God's love. His perfect love means we have nothing to fear. His perfect love sent his Son as the complete and total sacrifice for our sins.

Not everyone sees God's love like that. They believe God sent his Son to give us an example. He sent his Son to give us a start. If that's true, then God's love is not perfect... it's not complete. Instead it's

partial. It's about as much love as you'd show by buying a friend a brand new car, handing over the keys, and then saying, "By the way, I only made the first payment for you... you're responsible for the remaining 4 years and 11 months of payments." That would reflect an imperfect love. Jesus' love isn't like that. He paid the full price for our freedom. His love is perfect and complete. Therefore, there is no possibility of punishment. Therefore, there can be no fear.

### **19 We love because he first loved us.**

The only reason there will be God-like love in our lives is because he first loved us. We dare not mix up the order here. He loved us first. He forgave us first. He adopted us first. Now in response we love because he first loved us.

Now listen carefully to these last two verses because this makes the point:

**20 If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.**

You can't say you love God but still hate your brother, or sister, or mother-in-law, or your crazy neighbor, or even the person that gossiped about you behind your back and ruined your good name. If you are in God and he is in you, then the love of God is in you and you are in it. And if you are saturated with the love of God, then in your relationships with everyone else, you *will* show love. If you don't, then you're a *liar* about saying you love God. Strong words, isn't it?

Now listen. Christianity has been greatly damaged by people who profess to be Christians, but then they don't act like Christians. People say they love God, but they don't live in love. They say they are a disciple of Jesus, but they don't do what Jesus commanded: love one another. No wonder unbelievers aren't interested in learning more about Christ! No wonder they think the church is full of hypocrites!

So listen: Christianity isn't only about what a person believes. It's also about what a person does. [Repeat.]

If you thought that being a Christian is not about actions, but only beliefs, you're sadly mistaken. If a part of you has ever thought, "It's not so important what I do as a follower of Christ, as long as I know and believe what he taught, and go to church and pray... then I'm a true disciple of Jesus."

But Jesus never taught that. Jesus said, "Blessed are they who hear the word of God AND obey it (that is, put it into practice.) And yes, Jesus said in one place, (John 8:31) "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples." But he also said, (John 13:35), "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Jesus, what does it look like to be your disciple? "Know and believe. Live and do." [Repeat.] Defining characteristics of a follower of Jesus are 1) That you rely upon him as the Son of God and your Savior from sin and disobedience. You then enter into his love. And then 2) That you live that love in your daily life... that is you act out in the love of Jesus Christ in all of your relationships. Understand right: Know and believe is what establishes your relationship with God. It's God's work for you. But the live and do part is a necessary consequence when you know and believe! Everyone who truly knows and believes in Jesus is in God and God is in them. God is love, so they are in love and love is in them. Therefore they necessarily will live and do love in their daily lives. Love is the necessary consequence of being in a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Can you imagine what the Christian church would look like today if Jesus followers had always taken these words of his seriously? There are some *severe* lapses of love in the Christian church as you look at our history. And Christ's reputation still suffers from it. There are still people today who say, "Yeah, I see what Christianity is capable of when I look at the Crusades or the Spanish Inquisition. That's not a faith I

will never adopt as my own.” To this day, the Church’s reputation is tarnished by some extremely loveless people who didn’t take seriously Jesus command to love.

But we don’t have to go deep in church history or travel far in the world to see the damage done by lovelessness. I bet most of you could give examples of when you were hurt by a fellow believer because of their lack of love to you. I imagine most of you know relatives, co-workers or friends who don’t go to church anymore because they were hurt by the lovelessness of Christians.

So imagine: What can our church look like going forward if we all embrace this teaching of Jesus, and by the power of God living in us, with intention and purpose go forward now and live in love toward others. What would this do? What if your life always overflowed with the love of Christ? How would your influence with others change? How many people would ask you about your strange, loving behavior? How many people would take your invitation to church more seriously?

So the challenge is this, brothers and sisters. 1) Repent of you past loveless acts which have damaged the reputation of Christ and his church. Confess to God. But not only! Confess to the person you hurt as well. Even if they’re not a Christian, apologize for you lovelessness. 2) Return to the cross of Christ and bask once again in the unrestrained overflowing love of Jesus Christ. See him bleeding and dying for your sins. Know for a fact that his payment was all sufficient and your sins are fully and freely forgiven. 3) Resolve with the help of God who lives in you and in whom you live to now live in love. To live pouring out love. Let the love of Christ pour out in your life so that you turn into a giant magnet that draws people to Christ, so they can come to Christ, know and believe... and then go forward to live in love too.

Friends, go boldly and love each other! Amen.