

How to Keep from Growing Cold

Postcards from John, Part 4

2 John 5-6

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

The Apostle John reminds believers of the Lord's commandment to love (agape) one another. This love is a matter of the will, an obedience to God's commands. We live in a world that is struggling to hold on to the divine definitions of truth and love; our culture has been attempting to redefine the term love differently than God intended. As believers, we are still called to obey under the divine definition of love, even when the world around us does not.

Discussion Points:

To love others is a command and we are to walk according to His commands.

- What happens to a culture that doesn't choose to walk with God?
- What happens to a generation that replaces God's definition of love with a human definition?
- Is there ever a situation where it is acceptable to redefine love? In what situations has God called you to practice divine love?

John 13:35 states, *they will know you are my disciples by your love for one another.*

- Why would your testimony be affected by your obedience or lack of obedience to agape love?
- What are some ways that you have been able to share the love of Jesus to others?
- How might a believer's joy tie into his love?

Love is patient, kind, and rejoices with the truth. It isn't jealous, arrogant, selfish, or keep accounts of wrongs suffered. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13)

- Is the command to love others difficult? Why or why not?
- How do love and truth work together in your life?
- What is the impact on the world when we live by agape love? Are there periods in history that bear out witness to this?

Discussion Guide Cont.

Gospel Connection:

Jesus was the ultimate example of living out a life of divine love. He loved the world so much that He selflessly suffered and died to pay the penalty of sin on a believer's behalf.

Practical implications:

Think: How am I living my life in obedience to divine love? Are there areas that I need to improve upon?

Pray: Praise God for sending the ultimate gift of love, His Son, to be our means of salvation. Ask that He help you to walk in loving obedience to bring honor to Him and to bless the lives around you.

Do: Practice agape love in all situations.

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One of the highly acclaimed novels from the 20th century is entitled, *One Hundred Years of Silence*. In it, the author described a mythical village suffering from a plague which resulted in slow, but certain amnesia.

As the effects of the plague slowly took over the minds and – ultimately – the lives of the villagers, it gradually brought about a complete loss of memory.

To try and retain as much meaning as possible, one of the villages came up with the idea of labeling everything. So, with a brush and some paint, he began marking everything with its name: table, chair, clock, door, wall, bed – and so on. He went outdoors and began marking the animals with his paint brush: goat, pig, chicken and cow.

But as their memories continued to fade away, he realized he needed to be even more explicit; so he began writing out descriptions; he wrote a note on a cow that read: This cow must be milked every morning so that she will continue producing milk. Milk is something you can drink.

Eventually, as memories of what everyone knew to be true continued to fade away, the villagers came together out of concern that they were forgetting the most important thing; and they put a placard up at the entrance to town that read, “God exists” . . . that memory was slipping away as well.¹

I couldn’t help but think that one of the more obvious and pervasive results of the fall of mankind into sin, which began with Adam and Eve, is this pervasive ever-present plague that produces spiritual amnesia.

We tend to forget what things mean . . . and why they matter; we tend to forget the reality behind words like God, love and truth.

Unlike those villagers, our generation insists on taking down the placard that declares, “God exists.”

Is it any wonder then, with the absence of a moral standard and law giver, that today, love is one of the most distorted and misused words in the English language . . . and truth, whatever that is, it is whatever you want it to be.

An old man, centuries ago, was aware of the danger – to forget key, core realities that govern and grow and guide our lives.

The true meaning of words was slipping from the village he lived in – as it is in ours – as it is in every generation that must be reminded.

Just look around at your world . . . today you can experience love without any resemblance to moral truth. Or, you can have a conviction for moral truth, without having any resemblance to a spirit of love.

Both are a danger to the believer and to the church and to the gospel – for we are to speak the truth – absolute, doctrinal, ethical, moral, gospel truth . . . but ***we are to speak the truth . . . in love (Ephesians 4:15)***.

Now if you’re old enough in the faith to have encountered the inspired writing of that old man, you’ll pick up on the fact that he uses the words truth and love over and over again.

He’s constantly defining and illustrating them.

And he’s continually driving us back to an inspired dictionary of divine meaning.

You see it’s one thing for the world to be affected by this plague of amnesia, it’s another thing for the believer to forget what these words mean.

So take your preserved copy of this old Apostle’s inspired letter – it’s marked Second John – turn there once again.

We’ve arrived at verse 5 in this brief postcard to a lady. The Apostle John is now

going about to invite her back to the Divine dictionary of meaning.

Verse 5 opens with that gracious invitation – notice:

Now I ask you, lady . . . (2 John 5a).

Now I entreat you . . . Now I graciously request of you, lady . . .

That word *kuria* appears again, which you can translate, Madam or Ma'am . . . Now I kindly ask you, Ma'am,

. . . not as though I were writing to you a new commandment, but the one which we have had from the beginning – from the outset, you could translate it – we've had this from the outset – **that we love one another** (2 John 5b).

John reminds her of the Lord's commandment – first given to the disciples in the upper room; John was actually in the room when Jesus delivered this new commandment decades earlier.

The command wasn't new in the sense of new revelation – it had already been delivered to the Old Testament Jews who were commanded to love their neighbors (*Leviticus 19:18*) and even to love the strangers among them (*Deuteronomy 10:19*); but now Jesus was delivering it with a new emphasis and with Himself as the new example.ⁱⁱ

As I've loved you, now you love each other (John 13:34).

This is an old commandment with a new application for a new dispensation of the soon to appear new church age for a new, redeemed race where the descending, indwelling Holy Spirit would produce in them the fruit of the Spirit, which is first and foremost, love (*Galatians 5:22*).

Notice how John uses discretion in his personal note to his faithful woman . . . he doesn't write, '*This is the commandment which we have had from the beginning, that you love me and that I love you.*'

The pronouns change from singular to plural at different places in this postcard and this is one of them – and wisely so.

John is including her children – just as he did in *verse 1* where he tells this woman that he loves her and her children in the truth.

Now in *verse 5* he's using discretion by including not only her children but he's broadening this invitation to love to her church as well, who will no doubt hear the contents of his letter.

John knows by now, as a 95 year old man, that whatever he writes to anybody is more than likely going to be read by everybody.

That's a good reminder by the way when you write that email – more than likely, more than one person is going to read it. Especially if it begins with, "Now keep this between us."

Yea right.

John discreetly and wisely includes her family and more than likely her church family in this command, so that they all, and we all today, as a body of believers, obey the command to love one another.

And isn't that a strange command? How do you command somebody to love anybody?

How many guys in here who are married . . . she married you because you commanded her to love you. It doesn't work that way.

Listen, apart from accepting Christ, the best day of your life was the day she married you, amen?

Apart from accepting Christ, the best day of your life was the day she married you, amen?

Thanks God for second chances.

Listen, no bride in here walked down that aisle because of an ultimatum.

No . . . he proposed . . . he didn't command.

So this is odd . . . is it possible to command love?

Well, if we go to this divine dictionary for the definition of love, the answer is actually yes.

Agape/love, the word used here, isn't a feeling although it can include feelings; it isn't an emotion even though it can involve wonderful emotions . . . but feelings and emotions ebb and flow, rise and fall.

But this love, commanded by God between husbands and wives, brothers and sisters in Christ, and between God and the redeemed church happens to be a choice to love.

Agape/love is an act of the will . . . which is why John can use the present tense here to **love one another** – not intermittently – daily; not if the weather’s nice – but through stormy weather; not because we feel like it or want to – but because we decided to.

Which is why I like to remind couples in weddings I preside over, that they are standing before God and these witnesses not because they’ve fallen in love – although they obviously have – but there’s something deeper taking place . . . they are standing here not because they’ve fallen in love, but because they’ve chosen to love – to bring the totality of their will to the marriage altar – and sacrifice themselves for the sake of another.

One author wrote that love is a lifestyle of selfless living.ⁱⁱⁱ

That’s a meaning which is fading with the plague of amnesia. Look up the word love today, like I did this past week, and the primary meaning that shows up is – and I quote – “an intense feeling of deep affection.”

Now don’t get me wrong; love can involve an intense feeling of deep affection – there’s nothing quite as thrilling as those feelings. But the question comes, what happens when the feelings aren’t so deep . . . or intense.

What happens when it’s nothing but dirty dishes and overdue bills and overflowing diaper pails – now that’s some intense aroma, I’m not sure about feelings.

Are you going to serve in that ministry to others here in the body because you have intense feelings of deep affection? Are you going to demonstrate love toward your wife or husband or children or extended family and other believers and even an enemy or two because you are simply swept along by deep affection?

Agape/love – if we go back to the Divine dictionary – is something that overcomes feelings – it anchors emotions – it chooses to act

upon the will to demonstrate selflessness and obedience to God’s definitions.

So let me define agape/love this way:

Love is the decision of the will to demonstrate the will of God.

And just in case we’re not convinced that’s the true definition of love – John invites us to the Divine Dictionary where he writes, in **verse 6**,

And this is love, – literally, and here is what I mean by love^{iv} **that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning** – from the outset – **that you should walk in it** (2 John 6).

John writes in circular reasoning – love is obedience to God’s commands; obedience to God’s commands is love.^v

And when you follow this divine definition, one Greek scholar wrote, this kind of love becomes the governing reality for victorious Christian living.^{vi}

And I don’t believe he’s overstating his point.

If you follow this command (singular) – **to love one another** – and you will be able to victoriously follow the other commands (plural).

Here’s how it works – if you love someone:

- you’re not going to lie to them
- you’re not going to bear false witness against them
- you’re not going to cheat on them
- you’re not going to hate them
- you’re not going to kill them
- you’re not going to covet what they have
- you’re not going to steal from them

You see how love becomes the absolute foundation for obeying the will of God.

John says here, this is the way you **walk** . . . this is the sphere in which you walk . . . this is your conduct . . . in other words, this is your pattern for life.^{vii}

So let’s ask another question: what happens to a culture that doesn’t want to walk with God? What happens when a generation takes down the placard at the entrance of their village that says, “God exists”?

They virtually condemn themselves to the plague of amnesia where they end up losing the true meaning of love and the absolute certainty of truth.

And by the way, this isn't just a novel . . . this isn't just a mythical village.

This plague happens to be real. And it actually started a long time ago. And to this day we're fighting our own battle against it.

Think about this – there was a time when Adam walked with God . . . I mean, he literally walked with some physical manifestation of God in the Garden of Eden.

But then – even after having the incredible privilege and joy and experience of walking with God, he chose to disobey God.

And what happened? His love turned cold; his attitude toward God turned into fear and resentment. His love for Eve turned into accusation and blame – this is all your fault!

Through disobedience Adam grew – and do you realize how fast it all happened – he grew self-centered and proud and distant and his heart grew cold.

Here's a New Testament description of what happens when you refuse to walk with God –

Because lawlessness is increased, the love of many will grow cold (Matthew 24:12).

That's true during the Tribulation period of defiance which Jesus is describing in that context; but it's true of anyone at any time who abandons the commands of God . . . *lawlessness increases and love grows cold.*

And there's a very warning in this for every true believer. Not that you can lose your salvation, but you can certainly lose your joy . . . your testimony . . . your love for others . . . and grow self-centered and proud and cold . . . and ultimately lose a full reward of joyful service.

That's exactly what John is going to warn us of in **verse 8** – watch out . . . you don't want to forfeit a full reward.

But that's another sermon.

What I want to do now, as we wrap up this study is answer a simple question.

How do you and I keep from growing cold? How do we keep from growing cold? Some of you are thinking, turn down the thermostat in this auditorium – it's freezing in here . . . that's not what I'm talking about.

How do you keep your heart from growing cold? Even if your hands and feet are . . .

Two ways . . . first,

Accept the fact that love is not an option.

Loving others is not an option.

In fact, Jesus said,

They will know you are my disciples by your love for one another (John 13:35).

This isn't an option for an obedient believer; in fact, this happens to be our personal identification.

Jesus is effectively saying, this is how the world is going to know that something supernatural is happening in your life – because in the world:

- love comes and goes;
- love is self-centered and self-serving;
- love is when you intense feelings of deep affection

And yet you guys are loving as a lifestyle of selfless practice.

Marcus Felix, a Roman lawyer living in the second century wrote of the Christians – and I quote – “They love each other, even without being acquainted with each other.”

Love isn't an option, it is our badge of identification.

Secondly,

Acknowledge the fact that truth is not an opinion.

Love is not an option . . . truth is not our opinion.

John writes here – notice in verse 6:

Walk according to His commandments. (2 John 6)

Commandments are not the same thing as suggestions.

And according to the Divine Dictionary – there is a moral law giver who delivered some commandments and they are not our opinion but

His declaration – and the definition of this declaration happens to be our personal confession.

What He says is what we believe . . . and on the basis of what we believe, this is how we are supposed to behave.

And the lawless world that is losing its memory of what a cow is and a chicken is and love is and truth is . . . they will say, “But don’t be so declarative . . . don’t be so dogmatic about things . . . don’t go around writing notes on everything – telling us what this is and what that is . . . relax . . . truth is personal to you . . . it’s elastic . . . it’s flexible.

One author, with a touch of humor wrote that everyone wants inflexible dogmatic truth in what really matters to them; he wrote, imagine going to the doctor’s office for a check-up. The doctor says to you, “You are a magnificent physical specimen. You have the body of an Olympic champion. Congratulations.” Later that day while climbing a flight of stairs, you have chest pains. You find out that your arteries were so clogged that you were one jelly doughnut away from the grim reaper.

You go back to the doctor and say, “Why didn’t you tell me?” And the doctor says, “Well, I knew your body was in worse shape than the Pillsbury doughboy, but if I tell people stuff like that, they get offended. It’s bad for business. They don’t come back. I want this office to be a safe place where you feel loved and accepted.” You’d be furious and would say to the doctor, “When it comes to my health, I want the truth.” Obviously, when something matters to us, we don’t want make-believe comfort – we want the truth.^{viii}

You want love? You can’t have love without truth. You want truth? You can’t have truth without God.

You want to keep your heart from growing cold?

- Accept the fact that love is not an option
- Acknowledge the fact that truth is not an opinion.

And beloved, one of the most dangerous times in your life, where you are most likely to grow cold is:

- when life hands you disappointment;
- when loving actions don’t seem to gain a response;
- when truth only makes life harder;
- when God whom you believe exists . . . seems so far away.

When our memories fade in the noise of our culture and the undertow of our own sinful nature doubts the meaning of words like love, truth, obedience and joy.

I think of a little nine year old boy who was diagnosed with mononucleosis. The doctor ordered him to stay indoors for the entire summer. Chris was a typical rambunctious kid and to be told to stay indoors and no Little League baseball, no fishing trips or bike rides . . . this was a tough time.

Chris’ dad, also a believer, thought that perhaps the Lord would use this time of solitude to develop in Chris something useful. He owned a drugstore where he sold odds and ends – even some cheap guitars, which he knew how to play. So he gave his son a guitar and then taught him a new chord or technique each day.

Turns out, Chris had a knack for playing and by the end of the summer was playing songs and even writing some of his own.

Within a few year, as a young teenager, he was leading worship. Today, he’s the most sung songwriter in the world. His name is Chris Tomlin.^{ix}

And Chris writes songs with lyrics like:

He wraps Himself in light
And darkness tries to hide
And trembles at His voice;
Age to age He stands
And time is in His hands
Beginning and the end;
Name above all names
Worthy of our praise
My heart will sing,

How great – how great, is our God.

Dark times, and difficult times can be the prelude to discerning moments . . .

developing moments . . . so long as we stay close to the Dictionary – the Divine Dictionary – which gives us the meaning and reality of life-directing, hope-building; heart-redeeming words, like God, truth and love.

Pray

Sing:

Amazing love, how can it be,

That Thou my God
Should'st die for me.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 02/10/2019 by Stephen Davey.

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i Gabriel Garcia Marquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude (Harper Perennial Classics, 2006), pp. 46-48; Citation:

<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2015/september/5092115.html>

ii Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Alert: 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, 2 Peter (David C Cook, 1984), p. 129

iii Herschel H. Hobbs, The Epistles of John (Thomas Nelson, 1983), p. 155

iv Robert W. Yarbrough, 1-3 John: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 2008), p. 341

v Constantine Campbell, The Story of God Bible Commentary: 1, 2 & 3 John (Zondervan, 2017), p. 194

vi D. Edmond Hiebert, The Epistles of John (BJU Press, 1991), p. 300

vii Adapted from Kenneth S. Wuest, Wuest's Word Studies: In These Last Days (Eerdmans, 1954), p. 203

viii Adapted from John Ortberg, "Loving Enough to Speak the Truth," preachingtoday.com

ix Adapted from Max Lucado, Unshakable Hope (Thomas Nelson, 2018), p. 87