

1 John 4:7-5:4
Walk in the Source of Love

Good morning, church – it's great to see everyone here today for the second last sermon in our 1 John series – and we have quite a large passage before us today, 19 verses in fact, so let's just have a moment's prayer and then get into it.

[Opening prayer]

There are many ways that we can define ourselves – different labels that we can use to indicate aspects of our identity.

Often, when first meeting someone, the question will be asked “what do you do for a living?” And we tend to respond by saying things like, “I am a...” fill in the blank. Our occupations are often a vital part of how we see ourselves.

We also define ourselves by the teams we support, the nationality we have – there are heaps of ways to do it.

Who here is old enough to remember Mr T?

Here's how he defines himself: “I'm a Christian who just happens to be an actor...I am a Christian first.”

How do **you** do it? How do you define yourself?

Listen to how John our author defines himself:

26 When Jesus saw his mother and the **disciple he loved** standing there... (John 19).

What's John's description of himself? He is the disciple Jesus loved. Isn't that a wonderful statement of identity? A wonderful testimony of the centrality of God's love in his life?

God's love is such a strong theme in John's writing that he's even been called “The Apostle of Love”.

And we get a real sense of that in today's passage, where the word “love” is seen 32 times in these 19 verses! And that's 32 out of a total of 45 times in this whole letter – 70% of what John has to say about love he says in these verses.

And what he shows us in these verses is that God **is** love, and that we respond to the God of love by walking **in** God's love.

So that's what I've titled today's sermon: Walk in the Source of Love.

And what I want you to see as we work through these verses is that “God's love is not to be kept to ourselves.”

So, let's see how this section breaks down:

God is the Source of Love (4:7-10)

God's Love is to be Shared by Us (4:11-5:4)

God is the Source of Love, 4:7-10

In these first 4 verses we see John grounding love itself in God as its source, its very foundation.

Let's read vv7-8:

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

John reminds us that our love for each other is evidence that we are truly "born of God". Why?

Because "love is from God" – he is the **source** of love, and those who are born of God are able to draw from this source of love to guide and empower us.

And at the end of v8 John says one of his most famous lines: God is love. He will say it again in v16.

But what does he mean? Let me just spend a few minutes saying something about that phrase.

A few years ago, I heard a preacher say that "God is love" means that God is **made** of love, that he is a big **ball** of love floating around somewhere in the cosmos...and if that makes sense to you, then you are doing better than me!

Because I don't have the faintest idea what that means!

What **John** means is that love is one of God's essential attributes – love is **essential** to who God is.

Love is not a **part** of God that can be removed, like an arm or a leg. We cannot separate God's love **from** God because it is **essential** to who he is.

But does John also mean that God's love is more important, or more central, to who God is than his other attributes?

I know people who think that – who would say that because John says that God **is** love, that makes his love his primary attribute, and all others are secondary.

But is that right?

I asked my class this question last year, and I got a really insightful answer from a Year 11 student. He said that if God is **more** loving than compassionate, then his compassion could be **improved**.

If he is not **as** compassionate as he is loving, then he could be **more** compassionate, his compassion could be increased to reach the same level as his love...and that doesn't seem right, does it?

Do we really want to say that God's compassion has room to grow? Or his mercy? Or his justice? Or any other attribute he has that is somehow "less than" his love?

No. But, because John says that God **is** love, it is tempting to somehow elevate his love above his other attributes.

But can we find any other attributes of God that are written about the same way?

God is...what? What else do the scriptures say "God is"? I'll just give two other examples for the sake of time.

1 Peter 1:16, quoting from Leviticus 19:2:
...for it is written, "Be holy, because I **am** holy."

Also Psalm 103:8:
The Lord **is** compassionate and gracious...

These are just two examples of other things that "God is" – so don't be tempted to elevate God's love above his other attributes just because John says God **is** love – these other verses show us that God **is** other things as well.

This isn't to diminish the importance of God's love – not at all! It is just to point out that God's love is not more important than any of his other attributes.

All God's attributes are held equally, perfectly and without limit by him and thus make up equally essential parts of his being. John is just focussing on his love here because, well, he's the Apostle of Love.

And we also need to avoid an error that many in our culture have fallen into.

Because God **is** love, there has been a tendency in our culture to elevate love **itself** to the status of God.

God is love has become love is God.

We can see this clearly in the discussion over sexuality, where love has become the most important thing of all. Anything and everything is acceptable if it is done under the banner of love.

This elevation of love to the status of God is so popular and tempting because it turns love into an impersonal force – it is no longer grounded in a person, it has no will of its own, no standards it demands we uphold.

And because of that, it offers no judgement!

To elevate love to the status of God is to remove from God all his other attributes – his holiness, his wrath, his judgement.

This is why it's popular – to pursue love is considered to be the same thing as pursuing God.

But that's not John's point – John does not see love as **equal** to God, he sees love as an **attribute** of God that he reveals to us, that he shows us with his actions.

See v9:

⁹This is how God **showed** his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

This is not the action of a **love** that is a God, but of a **God** who is love!

God's love is directional – and it is directed at us, his children! V10:

¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that **he loved us** and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

God's love is such that he loved us even before we loved him. It was not that we loved God and then somehow wooed him or convinced him to love us – just the opposite!

He loved **us**, even when we didn't love him, and it is his love that woos **us** into loving him. And it is a love of action because he sent us his Son to be a sacrifice that can make us right with God.

God then is the very source of love, "love is from God" v7 says – without him, there is no love!

So how should we respond?

We need to share God's love with others!

God's Love is to be Shared by Us (4:11-5:4):

Once again, as he has done many times already, John reminds us that our love for each other is a sign that we love God and he loves us. We **must** love each other just as God loved us.

Vv11:

¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we **also** ought to love one another.

God's love is our example to follow – his love is our guide in how to love others.

But note v12:

¹²No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

John says that God cannot be seen – and he will say it again in v20...and it can be difficult to worship and believe in a God that cannot be seen!

We know the Israelites struggled with this right from the start – it's part of why they built a golden calf soon after leaving Egypt. They wanted a God they could see!

But we also know that God refused to allow them to try and represent him in any physical form.

The second of the Ten Commandments deals with this. In Exodus 20:4-5 God says:

4 Do not make an idol for yourself, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. 5 Do not bow in worship to them, and do not serve them...

You see, any kind of image that they tried to make would reduce God.

They made a golden calf because the cow is a symbol of strength – but far from showing God’s strength, the statue reduced God to the form of a creature.

This is why we should not make images of God – any time we try, we communicate something wrong about him.

Think about this image of God creating Adam from the Sistine Chapel – it’s probably the most famous image of God we have. When you see how God is shown, what does it communicate about him?

Michaelangelo painted God like that because in his time and place that was a respectful way to show wisdom and strength.

But, far from **advancing** our understanding of God, this image has led to many, many mistaken beliefs about him.

For example, what it’s really done is teach generations of people that God is some old white dude up in heaven with a long beard.

And that’s why we can’t make images of him!

But, how then can we **show** our invisible God to others?

For a short time, we had Jesus walking the earth, the one Paul called the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15) ... but now he’s ascended back to heaven and can no longer be seen.

So how can we do it?

We can do it through our love for each other!

John says that if we love each other, the love of God will be found among us.

It will be **seen** in how we treat each other, and though we still may not be able to see God himself, we will see the **evidence** of his existence in our midst.

And so will others!

And didn't Jesus say the same thing? John 13:35:

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Now, Christians haven't always carried out this instruction perfectly...but we have **at times** done a pretty good job of it!

The visibility of God's love among his people has been noted even by Christianity's critics.

Look at these two comments from around the 200sAD:

Caecilius: “They [Christians] know one another by secret marks and signs, and they love one another almost before they know one another.”

Lucian, who is mocking the early church: “It is incredible to see the fervour with which the people of that religion help each other in their needs. They spare nothing. Their first legislator [Jesus] has put it into their heads that they are all brethren.”

These non-Christians saw the invisible God made visible through the love of the early Christian community.

This is what John means in v12:

...his love is made complete in us.

This might sound odd – is his love somehow **incomplete** without us? No – nothing about God is incomplete without us.

What John means is that God's love for us finds **fulfilment** in the love that we have for each other.

God's love is not a love that is to be kept to ourselves – it is a love that is to be shared and experienced and lived out by the whole community of his children.

And it is only when that happens that we can experience the full completeness of it.

This is one of the ways we can know we are truly God's – that we show our love to each other.

But v13 also gives us another way:

¹³This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.

In the previous verses, John's been exhorting us, encouraging us to certain actions – to test the spirits in v1-6, and to love each other in what we've just read.

But now in v13 he moves from exhortation to affirmation by repeating what he said in chapter 3:24: that it is by the presence of the Holy Spirit living in us that we can have assurance that we are God's and will continue to be his always.

When we see the out workings of discernment and God's love in our lives we can **know** that we have his Spirit living in us – this is another of the many great comforts that John offers us amidst his strong words of command throughout this letter.

Remember the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5? What's the first one mentioned?

Love!

We can know that we are walking in God's love, in the very source of all love, by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit who grows God's love in our lives.

And this term "we know" is in the present tense – it means that this is something we keep experiencing as we continue our Christian journey.

This is not some one-off moment of clarity – it's something that we carry with us throughout our lives as Christians.

Brothers and sisters – can you say that is true of your experience?

Are you daily being reminded by the Holy Spirit that you belong to God? That you "remain in him and he in you"?

Are you dwelling on this thought when your heart troubles you? When the wind and waves of uncertainty toss you around?

This is such a great comfort! To know that we belong to God!

John had a special way of knowing this – see v14:

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

Does that remind you of where he started this letter?

Let's read his first 2 verses of this letter again:

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. 2 The life appeared; we have seen it and **testify** to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

John had direct access to God's Son – he saw Jesus, touched him, spoke with him. And he is able to testify to us about what he experienced.

But what about us, so many centuries later? We don't have the same direct, physical access to the Son that John had. But don't worry – God hasn't left us in the dark! V15:

¹⁵ If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God.

John says that those who acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God have a living relationship with God himself – we remain in God and God remains in us!

So, we may not have had John's experience of touching Jesus, but we **do** have God living within us! Look at v16:

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 them.

Because God remains in us, we know God's love – that is, we have experienced it in our own lives – we can believe in that love.

What does that mean? It means we can trust it – we can have confidence in it.

We can rest in that love!

God is love – I said earlier that means that love is an essential part of who God is.

And because his love is essential to who he is, his love cannot let us down, it can never fail in securing our salvation, because if his love ever failed then God himself would have failed!

And once again John tells us that by remaining in love we remain in God and God in us. He's used this phrase about 20 times in this letter – I think he might be trying to tell us something important!

By believing in God's love we can **remain** in God's love, and we remain in God himself.

Brothers and sisters, I'm sure many of you have experienced difficult times. I'm sure many of you have been tempted to question God's love.

When things are tough it **is** hard to feel the love of God – I think we've probably all experienced that at some point.

But John says here that God's love can be trusted. God **is** love! He can never **not** be loving – he can never stop being himself!

And if we remain in him then we remain in that love.

Listen to this from Romans 8:38-39:

38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the **love** of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing that happens to us in this life can separate us from God's love. There will be times when we don't **feel** that love as keenly – but that is just our subjective **sense** of God's love, not his love itself.

Our feelings come and go.

They wax and wane like the moon.

At a full moon the moon seems so close that you can almost reach out and touch it – and it illuminates everything around us.

But two weeks later it will be almost impossible to see – and everything will be dark.

But – whether we see it or not, the moon is still there – it hasn't disappeared! And neither has God's love for us.

At times it shines so brightly that all our fears vanish in its brilliance. At other times it seems so distant that we can barely detect it at all.

But at all times it is there – it never leaves us!

And see now v17:

¹⁷ This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus.

This love provides us with confidence on the day of judgement because even now "in this world" we are like Jesus. How are we now like Jesus?

We are like Jesus because we remain in God's love, just as Jesus did and still does. The love of God was seen perfectly in the life of Jesus – he was the greatest visible example of the invisible God who is love.

His love showed us that he who "remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him" as v16 puts it.

And this love empowers us to believe in God's love, to trust in it – and that should drive out our fear of punishment.

V18:

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.

How does this love drive out fear?

Do you think Jesus feared being punished by his father for his own sins? No! He had lived the perfect life, done everything his father wanted and maintained a perfect love relationship with him.

He truly had remained in love and in God. What could he possibly fear?

And, listen carefully, although we don't live the perfect life Jesus lived, we are in Christ and he in us in a way that is so close it's like how your arm is part of your body.

Just as Jesus did not have to fear because of his love for the Father and the Father's love for him, so too that love should drive out of our lives any fear of judgement.

This doesn't mean we lose our "fear of the Lord" as Proverbs 9:10 means it – that's a reverence and awe for God that is born of us understanding our place before him as creator and us as creature.

And it doesn't mean we stop caring about God disciplining us for our sins as we walk through this life – his discipline is an act of a loving father for his child.

John is talking about fear of God's eternal judgement. The perfect love of God can and will drive out of your life the fear of God's judgement.

The fear of hell.

Do you live in fear of God's judgement, brothers and sisters? If you do, John says that you have not fully understood and believed in God's love.

Maybe you are not yet a Christian – if that's the case then you **should** fear God's judgement!

There is nothing **but** fear for you in your future – there can be no hope of love and comfort from your heavenly Father if you keep living in defiance of him.

But! If you come to him...if you accept his love...

If you lay down your rebellion and your defiance and accept his pardon...then you can also lay down your fear.

But if you are a Christian and you fear God's judgement – ask yourself why. Why are you not able to trust in his love?

Perhaps you are in a circumstance where his love seems distant – if that's you, remind yourself of what we've read here. Memorise the verses in Romans 8 I read earlier. Nothing can separate us from God's love!

The only way God's love can fail is if God stops being God! Rehearse these truths to yourself daily – plead with God to show you again the light of his love that you might rest in it and find peace.

Let God's love be the thing that grounds your confidence in him!

God is the very source and foundation of love. And his love empowers us to love others. Look at v19:

19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

We mustn't keep God's love to ourselves. We must share it with others – that is God's command.

But...why is this so important? Why is John telling us, yet again, that we must love each other?

Let's read chapter 5 v1:

5 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.

We are "born of God" when we believe in Christ, and we must show love to all those who are "born of him". We are, after all, now all God's children! We are not strangers, we are family! And family should have each other's backs!

Family should be able to depend on each other – to know that when we have need, we will be supported, cared for, looked after. We know, when we see dysfunctional families, families that ignore the needs of each other, that something isn't right.

That's not how it is supposed to be!

Christians are all God's children – and we **must** look after each other!

And now John gives us another "we know" but this one seems flipped around from previous ones. V2:

² This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands.

Previously, we've used our obedience to God as a way of knowing that we love **God**, but here John says it's also how we know we love other Christians!

By loving God and obeying him we will also know that we love each other. How? V3:

3a In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands.

Keeping God's commands shows we love God. And God commands that we love each other. So by loving each other we are showing that we love God!

And see the end of v3:

3b And his commands are not burdensome, ⁴ for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.

There are times as a Christian when it can seem very difficult to carry out God's commands and to live the way he wants us to live – have any of you experienced that?

But John says in v3 that God's commands are not "burdensome", literally, they are not "heavy" – they won't weigh you down like carrying a heavy load will.

It brings to mind this picture from Pilgrim's Progress. When Christian finally makes it to the cross carrying that giant heavy pack of his sin before God – what happens?

Does God congratulate him on making it that far and then load up his pack with the extra burden of keeping God's commands? No!

He takes from him his pack and lays it down – he is unburdened at the cross! Now he is free to follow God's commands!

But – Christian is given some weighty armour to wear and a sword to carry, and he will need it!

For soon he must face the demon Apollyon in battle. And I can guarantee you that at that point – the weight of his armour didn't feel like a burden!

And neither should God's commands to us. Sometimes they feel heavy, they feel difficult for us to carry.

But if we think of them like Christian's armour we will see that they are not a burden at all – they are a protection!

This also is a way that we can test our salvation – how heavy do God's commands feel to us?

For the person who is striving to please God in a purely natural sense, without the love of God and the help of the Holy Spirit, the weight of God's commands is actually crushing!

We can never live up to them! All we can do is be ground into the dust by our failures.

But, when we are empowered by God's love, his commands are not a burden. Many people in the world will look at us and how we live and think that living God's way is far too difficult, far too burdensome.

But John says in vv3-4 that because we have overcome the world, his commands are not in fact a burden.

I remember when I first joined the army how uncomfortable it was to wear this – this is called "webbing" with a "b" – not "wedding" as the boys at the pre-preach thought I said!

This webbing was uncomfortable at first: the shoulder straps seemed painful and the belt around the waist seemed to chafe.

The bags of food, water and ammunition seemed like they would weigh me down!

But as I carried that webbing day after day, I began to adjust to them – I began to lose the discomfort of wearing them and began to be comfortable in them.

And I started to realise the benefits of having my water bottle within reach, of having my food and ammo where I could easily get at it.

It was no longer a burden – I now appreciated what I was carrying!

And you will find that over the course of your Christian life, the more you walk with God, the closer you are to Christ, the easier it becomes to live his way.

You begin to take joy in living out God's will for your life, in overcoming your sin, in resisting the demands of the world.

It is our relationship with Christ that provides us with what we need to conquer the world and to experience the **freedom** of living God's way – his commands are not a burden!

Is that your experience? Do you feel that God's commands for your life are a burden? Or are they a comfort?

Do you take joy in living God's way? Or do his commands still chafe, like my webbing did they first few times I wore it?

If so, I encourage you to **trust** Jesus through your acts of obedience and see him reward you richly.

Through living life God's way, through trusting in Christ and loving God and keeping his commands we can walk in victory! We can conquer everything the world throws at us.

Like Christian, we will be equipped to deal with what comes our way.

If we properly understand that God is the source of love, the very foundation of love, then we will also understand that his love is not to be kept to ourselves.

It must be shared with others!

So let's talk about that as we finish with your homework task.

I want you to think about how you would answer this question: How am I sharing God's love with my brothers and sisters?

I asked you a couple of weeks ago to look around our church and make a list of all the needs you see here – did you do that?

Has anything changed since then?

Have you actually been doing anything about the needs you see before you?

What steps have you taken towards sharing God's love with others? About helping those in need?

If you don't know what the needs are in this congregation, go and talk to one of the Elders or the Deacons – they will be able to put you in touch with someone you can help.

That's just one very simple way that you can share God's love.

These brothers and sisters here are very much visible – and if we aren't showing our love towards these who we can see, can we really claim to love the God who we cannot see?

Don't keep God's love to yourself.

Share it with others!

Let's make our community here like the ones I showed you quotes about earlier.

Let's be the kind of family that even our critics look at and say: they **love** each other!

Join me in prayer.

Closing song: *How Deep the Father's Love for Us*

1 John 4:7-5:4
Walk in the Source of Love

God is the Source of Love (4:7-10)

- 1) How is our love for each other evidence that we are “born of God”?
- 2) What does John mean when he twice says “God is love” (vv8 + 16)? What does he NOT mean?
- 3) Do you think God’s love is more important or central to who God is than his other attributes?
- 4) What else does Scripture say “God is...”? (Hint: Ps. 103:8)
- 5) If God is love, does that mean love is God?

God’s Love is to be Shared by Us (4:11-5:4)

- 1) How should we respond to God’s love? (Hint: v11)
- 2) How would you explain v12?
- 3) Why is it hard to worship a God that can’t be seen?
- 4) V13 says that the presence of the Spirit in our lives is “how we know that we live in him and he in us”. What does John mean? How does this connect to v15?
- 5) How does God’s love provide us with confidence in the day of judgement? (Hint: v17)
- 6) How does v18 line up with Proverbs 9:10?
- 7) What is the connection between loving our brothers and sisters and loving God? (Hint: v20)
- 8) What is the connection between loving God and loving our brothers and sisters? (Hint: 5:2)
- 9) How is it that “his commands are not burdensome”? Aren’t they difficult to carry out?
- 10) Have you done your homework?