

# Kindled Fire

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## True Piety Distinguished From False

08/05/2012

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#### 1 John 4: 20-21

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I know what you are thinking. All these sermons on loving one another are starting to get to you. You've had this inkling in the back of your head. Now it is confirmed: **"He's a liberal!"**

For the last several weeks you've been thinking to yourself, "He really seems like he's taken his eyes off the Lord. He keeps blathering on and on about love. All he talks about anymore is 'loving our neighbor.'"

Who else prattles on *ad nauseam* about such things? I mean, we came here today to talk about God, right? Church is supposed to be a place where we focus on the Gospel!

For the last couple of months all it seems like we do is talk about the guy to my left.

I wouldn't doubt that some of you are starting to think that we've lost our focus; church is not as spiritually inclined as it used to be. It seems like things have gotten a little too man centered for your liking, and maybe its time to start thinking about finding a place that's not so "worldly."

It is true. Liberals love this epistle. It really fits well into their playbook. As we've said before, this epistle is very much the book of love. And liberals love to quote some of these passages, "God is love!" "We have to love one another." And we will sing, "They will know we are Christians by our love."

And, on the opposite extreme, some people who go by the name Christian—people who might label themselves "conservative Christians"—they can get a little queasy with this book. They want more preaching on Jesus. They want to hear more about Christ. They have had enough of this love your neighbor thing and they want to hear more sermons on *true* devotion to Christ.

Well, if that's your attitude, you should be unsettled. As a matter of fact, really tears into that kind of mentality in this passage. We like to harp on the liberals—you know, the people who make too much of the horizontal aspect of the faith and they don't put any focus on the vertical—our relationship with God. But we need to beware that there is a false piety that is just as wicked. To make the vertical the central focus, to the neglect of the horizontal, is just as wrongheaded.



Heaven is a World of Love, by  
Jonathan Edwards



The Mental Agonies of Hell, by  
Robert Murray McChesney



The World Ripe To Harvest: Reap or  
It Perishes

In this passage John writes to show us what true piety looks like. He wants us to focus our attention on that horizontal aspect of the faith and understand that Christianity is very much a practical religion.

We see as much there in verse 20. He wants us to get our minds out of this mystical world that we can get caught up in; where it is all lovey dovey on God.

### I. True piety is not a bunch of religious blather.

Look at what he says in verse 20. He uses rather strong language. *"If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar."*

Now the word liar there is where we get our word "pseudo." You've heard of a pseudonym. That's someone who uses a fake name. He's lying about his true identity. Well, John says there are pseudo Christians out there. There are people who think they are Christians, but, in all reality, they're not. They are mistaken about their true identity.

And the reason they are mistaken is because they do not evidence any real love the brethren. They're religion is all hype. They may seem like very pious people because of how much they talk about God, but in all reality they are not all that pious. Theirs is a false piety because there are no social or moral implications to their faith.

John wants to dispels this notion that you can have a love for God apart from loving your brethren.

Now, again, liberalism is a damnable heresy. And you know that liberalism is associated with the social gospel. It stresses the love of man to the neglect of any true love for God. Essentially it becomes all horizontal in its orientation and has no vertical element.

But John's saying here that the exact opposite is just as heretical. If our religion is all vertical and has no horizontal implications, you've made an equally heinous mistake. John says, I don't care how wrapped up in God you are. If you do not evidence any practical love for the brethren, *you are not a Christian!* You are a liar.

I fear for some people today. They are all caught up in their supposed love for God. They sing their praise songs at the top of their lungs. They can raise their hands and demonstrate an exuberance in their worship unlike anyone else, but they are all vertical. You can see them having a radical mystical experience with God. But they continue to be are some of the most irritable and impatient people.

You know, I used to run in Pentecostal circles. I got burned out on the liberal, mainline churches that had nothing to do with God. I used to sit in a mainline church and just try to count the number of times they just mentioned the word God. I would actually put notches on my bulletin when I heard them just say the word. I didn't even care if it was Allah that they mentioned, I was just listening for any vague reference to the divine. And there were some services that I never even heard the word.

So I left that church, and I was really drawn to the Pentecostal churches. I spent a lot of time there because they loved to talk about spiritual things. Their services were rocking. There were times where they were so caught up in the worship and praise of God that they said, "You know what, the Spirit is really moving here. So let's just skip the message and continue to focus our attention on His praise." And I loved it. I loved that these people loved God and were truly adamant about setting their minds on the things of the Lord.

Later I became a bit disenfranchised with that. It was almost like I had gone way off in the opposite direction from my mainline church. I began to find that there was very little in the way of focus on the commandments of God. There a huge emphasis on speaking in tongues and these radical mystical experiences, but people's lives were not changing all that much.

I continue to look back on those years as beneficial. I still have a great affection for my Pentecostal friends because of that zeal for the Lord that they have. But I recognize now that a lot of that was a false piety because there was no weight given to the social and moral side of the faith.



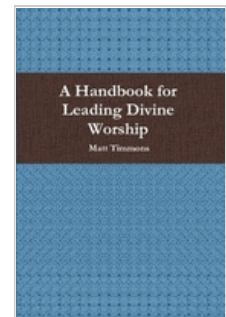
The Danger of a Life of Pleasure



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 1 Peter  
 1 Thessalonians  
 1 Timothy  
 Acts  
 Deuteronomy  
 Isaiah  
 John  
 Luke  
 Malachi  
 Matthew  
 Numbers  
 Proverbs  
 Psalms  
 Romans

## Archives

And before you go looking down at those Pentecostals, don't think that we *Reformed* types are all that different. We tend to favor this kind of thing too. The thing about Reformed people is that we like to focus on God, right. That's what Reformed theology does. It gets back to putting the god-ness in God. It puts God at the center of the faith and it emphasizes his sovereignty and his majesty.

So, like the Pentecostals, we get caught up in grand expressions of devotion to God. We just like to be a little more geeky about it all. That's even the thing, we make the faith into this cerebral affair, as if Christianity consisted of a bunch of intellectual propositions. And what we end up doing is that we talking a lot about God. We'll wax eloquently on the nature of the Trinity. We'll expound the intricacies of the two natures of Christ. We'll look like we are super Christians because we love to talk about the Transcendental argument and the intellectual preconditions of intelligibility.

And while such things might be nice, such things may be true, we have to remember that this is not the sole focus of the faith. It is not even the primary focus of the faith. If that is the way we are, then we've missed the whole point of Reformed theology—we've missed what John says, *"for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."*

I will tell you, I don't care how many Christian songs you have on your ipod. It doesn't matter how many Together for the Gospel conferences you go to. You might read every single blog that is posted on the Gospel Coalition's website. Whoop-t-do! If you are not loving the brethren, then you might as well be looking at porn because God does not take pleasure in it.

As John shows us here, our love for God cannot be divorced from real, tangible acts of love for our brethren.

*You must understand this: Christianity does not consist of a bunch of pious sounding, holy hype. John is very clear about that. Instead, he says, ours is a religion of proactive service.*

### **I. It is a religion of proactive service**

That's exactly what we find in verse 21. You'll notice that he says things there in a more positive light. He clarifies what true piety when he says, *"And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother."*

Friends, I am not pleased with an esoteric religion. We will have failed in our duty before God if we neglect the parts of Scripture that talk about our duty towards one another. We will have grieved God to no end if we give no thought to the needs of those around us and we are not actively seeking to meet those needs.

And really that gets at the heart of what love really is. You know, one of the sources I looked at this week really helped to put things in perspective. He said that we usually think of hatred as the opposite of love. But that's not true. Hatred is not the *opposite* of love, hatred is the *absence* of love.

You don't have to do anything to hate someone. We think that hating someone means fire-bombing their house or calling someone a bad name. But that's not hatred in the biblical sense. Hatred, in the Biblical sense, can be just standing there and doing nothing at all.

*"Whoever loves God, must also love his brother."* When he talks about loving the brother, he's talking about doing something on their behalf. He means actively seeking his welfare.

This is exactly what Jesus meant. Ok, you want to get spiritual and talk about Jesus. Let's do that for a minute. Let's talk about what Jesus said. Jesus gave us the Golden Rule. And what is that? Did he say, "Don't do to others as we wouldn't have done to us?" Absolutely not. He said, "DO to others as you would have done to you." He stated it in the positive, which means he wanted us to be proactive.

"Don't do to others" gives you more leeway, doesn't it? You are allowed to stand by and just leave other people alone. As long as you are not interfering with their lives, you are Ok. But that's not what Jesus said. He said, "DO to others." His intent was that we do interfere with people's lives.

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You remember the context of Jesus words. There in Matthew 7, where this Golden Rule is mentioned, it's actually in the context of his discourse on prayer! He's just said, if you need anything, pray about it. Your Father in heaven will not give you a scorpion if you need bread. He stands ready to help. And the very next words are, "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

Perhaps the context even means that the Lord's bounty will be supplied through you. From my perspective Jesus is saying, that your proactive service will be the means by which those prayers are fulfilled.

I might even suggest that this be a way you tweak the way you pray for people. When you get an email through the church list asking you to pray for someone in particular in this congregation, don't just say a quick prayer for them. Yes, ask the Lord to help them. But along with that prayer ask the Lord if there is anything you can do to assist in the matter.

Don't get me wrong, its good to pray for them. And given their circumstances, you may not be able to help beyond a simple prayer to God. That's fine. But there may be times that the Lord shows you something more you can do. You might think of a tangible way that you personally can help.

All in all, in praying this way, you will at least begin to avoid the pitfall of simply "being spiritual." And you can really begin to show your love for God in the way in which He desires.

### Conclusion:

Legend has it that the Apostle John lived well into his 90's. It is said that in those later years of life he was so feeble that he had to be carried to church each Lord's Day. But that did not deter him from continuing to speak. They say that upon arrival he would always declare one message: "Little children, love one another." When he was asked why this was the only thing he ever said, he would respond by saying, "After you have done this, you have done all."

We don't know if that story is true, but based on what we have seen here in this epistle we certainly would not be surprised if it were. That legend most certainly affirms what he says right here.

And we must take it to heart. The vertical aspect of our faith will never mean anything to God if it does not have this horizontal affirmation. It is only after we have done this, that we have done all.

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