

First Presbyterian Church of Upland

“THAT HE LOVES US”

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Text: 1 John 4: 7-12 *ESV*

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us

This week, we had a few days without internet at home. It was stranger than I’d expected. Without the internet, not only were we unable to surf the internet as usual, but we had no TV, no music (we put away our tape and CD players years ago), and half of our lights came on with a mind of their own. It felt like nothing was working—almost as if the electricity had gone out. I wondered whether we could have hot water, adjust the thermostat, or if the oven and the toaster would still work. It’s crazy because I lived through the 60s, 70s, and 80s with no internet—how did it become so important? I realized how much I took for granted and how much I depended upon it. We were living at home surrounded by modern conveniences, but it felt like we were camping.

[read text: 1 John 4: 7-12]

BAD WORDS

One of the first things I do when I study a Bible passage is to look for what I call “bad words.” By that, I mean weird English words from the translators. Here in this marvelous passage about love, we have a doozy, and we’re going to look at it before going deeper into the meaning of the whole reading.

The bad word is *propitiation*. I want to ask how often you use this word in your day-to-day speech and what is wrong with the translators that this is the best word they could come up with. To be quite technical, the more accurate word is *expiation*, which is equally bad, if not worse.

Pro-pitation seems to be moving *toward* or *for* something—“pitation” whatever that is—and *ex*-pitation is coming *out of* or *from* pitation. Remember last week when we discuss *of* or *from* God? We’re back to that. *PRO*-pitation or *EX*-pitation sound like opposites—toward something or out of something. But enough nit-picking.

The word means something like peacemaking or reconcillation. It is making good between two parties by means of sacrifice. John is telling us that Jesus is God’s sin offering *FROM* Himself and *OF* Himself. Again, Jesus is both *OF* God and *FROM* God, and there’s no finer way to slice it.

Expiation and propitiation both mean a sacrifice that appeases and makes peace. It is an act that brings two together as one, as in the word *atonement*, which is *at one-ment*.

LOVE COSTS

The act that brings the two together is sacrifice. Sacrifice is the language of sincerity. For love to be meaningful, it has to cost something. There can be no sincerity from one who has no skin in the game. If someone says, “I love you,” it may be sincere, but it’s hard to trust if it costs them nothing. Love communicates as love when it is costly. Love that costs one nothing is quite possibly a con.

Consider the young man wooing his bride. He presented her with a diamond ring—a costly extravagance for which he likely paid a month’s salary. The expense is a sign of self-sacrifice, and it communicates his sincerity. After they’re married and he says something really stupid, he brings home some sort of meaningful gift—a big bouquet, a box of chocolates (*See*, not Russel Stover)—again, a sacrifice to appease the anger of his beloved and, hopefully, secure her goodwill so that all will be well going forward.

All religion—and I mean manmade, natural religion—contains elements of sacrifice. Go anywhere in the world, examine the most primitive cultures, and you will find people who practice religious sacrifices as offerings to the gods. Grain offerings, animal sacrifices, and even human sacrifices all get lifted up to the gods through appeasement, expiation, and propitiation so that there can be peace between the people and the gods.

Question: when we think of pagan gods, has it occurred to you how selfish they are? They seem to me to be big takers, to say the least—self-absorbed and self-serving. They loom over the people and get mad if the sacrifices aren’t forthcoming. Pele, the god of the volcano, gets mad and blows his stack unless a virgin is ceremoniously tossed into the vent. Ba’al withholds the rain if the sacrifices are substandard. Asherah, if not kept happy, prevents fertility for the land, animals, and people.



What is the point of all this sacrifice? I appease the anger of the gods. Godzilla must be tranquilized, or he’ll stomp through downtown Yokohama. This appeasement of divine judgment is the point of sacrifice in pagan offerings.

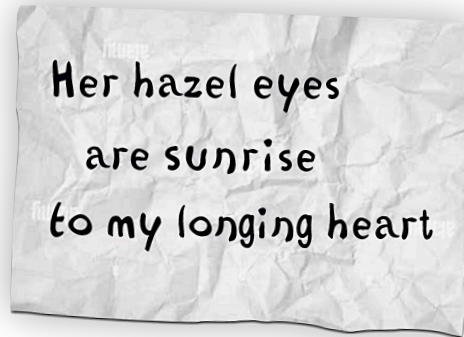
The sacrifice that breaks the spirit of judgment is what we call love. Love is a personal sacrifice for the benefit of another, which may win their favor and goodwill.

THE CRITIC

There was a very smart and tough high school English teacher who gave her 9th graders an assignment. “Write something short but meaningful—keep it under 10 words if possible.”

One boy in the class was small for his age and rather shy. The teacher liked him but felt he was a bit of a dreamer—creative but undisciplined and needing some development. The next day, the teacher gathered the students’ assignments, most of them printed up on their home computers, many with photos or illustrations to go with their 10-word statements. Then she saw the boy’s

note—just a scrap, which had apparently been crumpled into a ball and smoothed before submitting. It looked like something fished out of the wastebasket. On the crumpled paper, the boy had scrawled nine words by hand:



[Her hazel eyes Are sunrise To my longing heart]

The teacher read it aloud and then launched into a rational critique for the benefit of the whole class. She read it aloud: *Her hazel are sunrise to my longing heart. Did I not say that I wanted you to write something meaningful? Let's take a look at this one.*

"Her hazel eyes." First of all, who is "she"? We have no idea. And her eyes are hazel—do you know what that even means? Now, my eyes are called hazel colored because they are brown with gray rims, but you didn't know that, did you? So what is meant by hazel—do the eyes look like wood from a hazel tree? Like a hazel wand snapped off of a limb? This is senseless. Moving on:

"Are sunrise"—Really? Do you not know that the sun is stationary in relation to Earth? The sun doesn't "come up" or "go down"—it is an illusion caused by the Earth's rotation on its axis! And how can one's eyes be anything like the image of the sun appearing to rise in the morning? Absurd!

"To my longing heart"—How is your body's mindless blood pump involved? What fantastic connection do you presuppose between another person's light-sensory apparatus and your cardio health?

And what IS a "longing" heart—how can a heart "long" for anything? Does your aorta have eyes to see the effects of the planet's rotation? The whole nine word message presents us with a meaningless absurdity. So, young man, what was your purpose?

Sheepishly, the boy replied: "Well, I wasn't going to turn it in at all because I didn't want to embarrass you—because, teacher... it's about *you*—it's *for you*."

Several classmates giggled, but the teacher quietly looked down at the note, rereading it. She felt its crumpled texture, knowing it had been rescued from the wastebasket, and bravely handed it in. She read it again as for the first time. It was about her and for her. He *admired* her and may have been nursing something of a crush.

Her hazel are sunrise to my longing heart. She read it, and she *got* it. With tears in her eyes, she turned to the class:

“Boys and girls, I hold here the finest demonstration of poetry I have ever witnessed as a teacher.” She looked the boy in the eye: “Thank you so very much,” she said. And she meant it.

Her judgment had been broken by the boy’s words of sincerity and great heart.

THE GREAT PROOF

We need to hear John’s message for all we’ve said about sacrifice and its role in love. Why was it necessary for Jesus to die? Why did He have to be sacrificed?

There are plenty of people out there saying that the atonement wasn’t necessary—that it’s absurd to talk about God sacrificing His only Son to Himself to appease His own wrath. I strongly encourage you to disregard any teaching that undervalues or underplays the atoning sacrifice of Christ.

The question is: How do we know God loves us? He can say it, but what makes Him any different from the gods of the pagans—demanding our sacrifices so that His anger over our sin is appeased and He doesn’t destroy us as we deserve.

Follow me here: while it is the nature of human beings to appease God through sacrifices, what is Christ but God speaking our own language back to us? Is He appeasing His own anger over our sins, or is He demonstrating His love for us?

The death of Christ is proof of God’s sincerity that He loves us. It is God’s word saying, “People—how can I get it through to you that my love is sincere?”

What should it cost a god to prove divine love?

Other gods were selfish—takers—but here is God who is an endless giver.

Sins are forgiven, and Christ is the proof of their forgiveness.

We have new life and new love that powers everything. As the text says, verse 10:

10 In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

We are loved, and we are forgiven. Sin is over and done with. We are no longer judged for our sins because Christ has covered all sin. God is love that proves itself. That He loves us is the foundation for our love.

FRANKENSTEIN MATTERS

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* may be the most overlooked masterpiece of English storytelling. While often classified as a horror novel, it is far more than a mere monster story. Instead, Frankenstein is deeply theological, exploring the relationship between creator and creation—a profound meditation on what it means to be made, loved, and given purpose.

At its heart, Frankenstein parallels the biblical story of creation. In Genesis, God creates humanity and declares it “good.” This divine pronouncement is essential—it is not humanity that determines its own worth, but God’s blessing that bestows value upon His creation. The creature in Frankenstein, however, is tragically denied such a blessing.

Dr. Victor Frankenstein, unlike God, is a fallen and flawed creator. When he brings his creature to life, he does not see something good or worthy—he sees a horror. Lacking divine love, Frankenstein is incapable of affirming his creation’s worth. Where God blesses Adam and Eve, Frankenstein rejects and abandons his creature.

This theological distinction is critical. If only God is good, then only God can declare creation good. A human creator, burdened by sin and frailty, cannot fill the divine role. His failure to embrace his creation leads to the creature’s descent into despair and vengeance.

Our sympathy in the novel does not lie with Dr. Frankenstein but with the creature. Unlike the horror stereotypes developed around him, the monster is not born evil—he is born longing for love. All he wants is recognition, affirmation, and the assurance that his life has a purpose. But when his creator denies him love, he comes to believe his existence is a mistake.



This is the novel’s great tragedy: without a creator’s blessing, the creature sees no inherent value in life—his own or anyone else’s. He turns to destruction, not out of sheer malice, but because he has been cast out and left without purpose. If his life is an accident, then all life must be an accident. In his eyes, violence becomes a rational response to the world’s rejection.

The novel points to a profound truth: all human love, morality, and self-worth begin with God’s love for us. It is God’s blessing that affirms human life and makes love possible. We are not valuable because we declare ourselves valuable—we are valuable because our Creator has declared it so.

The ultimate proof of this love is found in Jesus Christ, whom God gave as a sacrifice for our sins. Where Frankenstein abandons his creation, God does not abandon us. Even in our sinfulness and suffering, God does not reject us as Frankenstein rejected his creature—instead, He redeems us through Christ. “That He loves us” means absolutely *everything*.

We need to read Scripture the way that teacher learned to read that poem. We can study and pull apart the words, but we are missing the whole thing if we do not hear the love letter. That is also true of today’s passage, and it is true of every passage we will ever read.

TAKING IT HOME

Because we are loved, we can and must love others. But love is not a law; it works like this, and I hope you’ll remember this phrase:

We are no longer judged for how we’ve sinned;
We are judged by how we love.

If there's someone in your life you've been trying to get through to—someone tough and resistant—a tough nut to crack with a hardened heart, then remember: Christlikeness will best be communicated by a Christlike sacrifice. They will never believe you—or us—until it costs us something. What's that other person worth to you? What are you willing to spend to see that person redeemed, brought around, and convinced of God's love as well as your own?

Well... that's one we live with. †

WE ARE NO LONGER JUDGED
FOR HOW WE'VE SINNED;
WE ARE JUDGED
BY HOW WE LOVE.

QUESTIONS

1. What do the words “propitiation” and “expiation” mean in simple terms?
2. To whom is Jesus sacrificed?
3. What one word best describes the sacrifice?
4. What matters more than all the religion in the world?
5. What is the Christian lesson from Frankenstein?
6. What is the basis for all the love in this world?