

1 John 4:8

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.

Analysis

He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. This verse presents the negative corollary to verse 7's positive statement, followed by Christianity's most concentrated definition of God's nature. "He that loveth not" uses the present participle, indicating habitual lack of love as lifestyle. "Knoweth not God" uses the same verb (*ginōskei*) as verse 7—this is experiential knowledge of relationship, not mere intellectual awareness. The logic is airtight: since love flows from knowing God, absence of love proves absence of genuine knowledge of God, regardless of claimed spiritual experiences or doctrinal correctness.

"For God is love" (*ho theos agapē estin*) is one of Scripture's most profound yet misunderstood statements. This isn't saying "love is God" (pantheism) or that God is merely loving (one attribute among many). Rather, love is essential to God's very being—it defines His nature and motivates His actions. Everything God does flows from love: creation, providence, redemption, even judgment. God doesn't merely act lovingly; He is love.

Yet we must understand this love biblically, not sentimentally. God's love is holy, just, and truthful—it cannot contradict His other attributes. His love sent Christ to die for sinners (verse 10) but also judges those who reject this sacrifice. God's love isn't tolerance of sin but costly provision of redemption. Those who truly know this God—who is love—will reflect His nature through self-giving love for others. Absence of love indicates absence of regeneration, regardless of religious profession.

Historical Context

This statement directly challenged prevailing views of deity in the ancient world. Greek gods were capricious, often cruel, motivated by vanity and appetite. They might favor some humans temporarily but weren't characterized by self-giving love. Roman religion was transactional—sacrifices to appease gods and gain favor. Even some Jewish traditions emphasized God's justice and wrath more than His love, viewing Him as distant and stern.

The Gnostic systems John opposed typically taught that the supreme God was remote, unknowable, and uninvolved with the material world. Some Gnostic teachers distinguished between the true God (spiritual, distant) and the creator God (inferior, sometimes malevolent). John's declaration that the one true God is love, demonstrated through sending His Son into the material world to die for sinners, contradicted Gnostic dualism and devaluation of the physical.

Early Christian martyrs faced torture and death while loving their persecutors—praying for executioners, forgiving enemies, and showing supernatural love. This inexplicable love testified to the reality of the God who is love. Church fathers like Augustine developed theology of divine love, explaining how God's love is both universal (for all humanity) and particular (saving the elect), both free and sovereign.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does understanding 'God is love' (not just 'God loves') deepen our view of His nature and actions?
2. Why is love (not just correct doctrine or religious experience) the evidence of truly knowing God?
3. How do we reconcile 'God is love' with biblical teachings on God's wrath and judgment?

Interlinear Text

ο	μὴ	ἀγαπῶν	οὐκ	ἔγνω	τὸν	Θεὸς	ὅτι	ὁ	Θεὸς
G3588	not	He that loveth	not	knoweth	G3588	God	for	G3588	God
G3361		G25	G3756	G1097		G2316	G3754		G2316
ἀγάπη ἐστίν									
love	is								
G26	G2076								

Additional Cross-References

1 John 4:16 (Love): And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.

Psalms 86:15 (References God): But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth.

1 John 4:7 (Love): Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.

2 Corinthians 13:11 (Love): Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.

Psalms 86:5 (Parallel theme): For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee.

Ephesians 2:4 (Love): But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us,

1 John 1:5 (References God): This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

1 John 3:6 (Parallel theme): Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.

1 John 2:9 (Parallel theme): He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now.

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