

**Message: “Practice Real Love”**

**What does real love look like?** Many people have tried to capture what real love is. You may recognize the lyrics to the song “Real Love” by Mary J. Blige,

*“Real love, I’m searching for a real love  
Someone to set my heart free  
Real love, I’m searching for a real love”<sup>1</sup>*

**This popular song expresses a truth: love sets us free.**

When we’re in love, nothing else matters. That annoying habit your partner has? Don’t even notice it. The tough words your best friend says? It’s no big thing. Let it slide, because good friends are allowed. The child who has colic? They can’t help it. Everything is good.

**Here's a good question: does falling in love release endorphins?**

Endorphins are the hormones that make our brain feel good. And, sure enough, based on MRI scans, there are indications that love lights up the pleasure center of the brain. When we fall in love, blood flow increases in the same part of the brain that is involved in obsessive-compulsive behaviors. Overall, we have a sense of well-being and security.

Dr. Mary Lynn of the Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine says, “This may explain why we concentrate on little other than our partner during the early stages of a relationship.”<sup>2</sup>

**The “honeymoon phase” of a relationship is real.** The idea that love is blind is a valid notion because we tend to idolize our love interest and see only things that we want to see in the early stages of the relationship.

**One thing you may not know.** As we move beyond the initial attraction stage into the attachment stage, the levels of these brain-pleasing hormones doesn’t drop. What changes is that we become more tolerant of the chemicals our body produces. To me that says we can still have a sense of well-being and security, but we have to be reminded – perhaps even relive those early, honeymoon days with fondness. We remember the passions of the early days as we settle into the deeper, more connected and committed stages of our relationship as we grow in love.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://genius.com/Mary-j-blige-real-love-lyrics>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/02/140206155244.htm>

**Today, we’re looking at a passage from the Bible that talks about – you guessed it – love; specifically our love relationship with God.**

Earlier we read from 1 John 3:16-24. This letter isn’t the gospel of John. It’s one of three letters written by John the Evangelist between 95-110 AD. Scholars don’t agree on whether the author is the same as John the Apostle. It’s possible the author was a member of the community that John the Apostle was part of. For our purposes, I’m just going to call the author John.

**John is clear about the purpose of this letter.** He intends to share the good news about Jesus “*so that you can have fellowship with us. Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ*” (1 John 1:3, CEB). Later, John adds “*so you don’t sin*” (2:1) and “*so that you know that you have eternal life*” (5:13).

**John wanted his readers to experience true fellowship with God and with God’s people.** But he knew it wouldn’t happen until Christians set aside their own selfish desires in favor of the pursuits God had for them. “To help us attain this goal, John focuses on three things: the passion of the believers, standing firm against false teachers, and reassuring believers that we have eternal life.

**John wrote to churches full of people who were discouraged,** whether due to their own sinful failures or false teachers. The aging apostle hoped to ignite the passion of believers so they might follow the Lord more closely and stand firm against those who meant to create turmoil. John wants us to solidify our relationship with God and gain confidence in God’s work in our lives.”<sup>3</sup>

**Our passage for today speaks to the passion of believers.** It focuses on the nature of our relationship with God. John starts chapter 3 with these words, “*See what kind of love [God] has given to us in that we should be called God’s children, and that is what we are!*” (3:1).

**You are God’s child and God loves you!** And God wants you to return that love in a meaningful, committed relationship. Best of all, God’s love will always be true, even on those days when we act out.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://insight.org/resources/bible/the-general-epistles/first-john>

**Recently, I had coffee with a friend of mine** (outdoors and socially distanced). He was sharing the difficulties he’s having with his 12 year-old son. Things are a little tense. My friend doesn’t know what to do. But he knows one thing: he loves his child and will always be available and willing to help. And he told his son that while sitting on his bed the other night.

**Sound familiar?** Maybe God is sitting on the edge of your bed, trying to tell you something right now. God is saying, “I love you and I’m always here, ready to help you when you’re ready.”

**How do we know that’s true?** John gives us three things to consider.

**First, we know we’re loved when someone sacrifices for us.** Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for us. He gave his life to restore our relationship with God. Would it hurt us to sacrifice some of our time, money, sweat or attention to show how much we love someone else?

**Second, we know we’re loved when we see it in action.** We’ve all heard people say loving and kind things, but not back them up in their attitude or actions. If we see someone in need but refuse to help, we aren’t being loving. We aren’t showing others that God is really a part of our lives in a meaningful way.

**Finally, we know we’re loved when we have confidence in the relationship.** I’ve seen old friends who kid each other in ways that seem harsh. To an outsider, the words are rude, but what’s really happening is that the words have no power to do harm. The friends are kidding each other about things they’ve already worked through. The terms have become an endearment.

**Another example is the couple who can sit and hold hands without saying anything.** They don’t have to speak because they are confident in their relationship with God and with one another. That’s real love. That’s the kind of love that sets you free from the issues and trials of each day.

**There’s one, big challenge to living and loving this way.** John says it several times, “*our hearts condemn us*” (vv20-21).

**What does that mean? It's self-criticism.** We can become so critical and accusing about our faults, failures and feelings that we lose sight of what truly matters. God loves us, unconditionally. And God invites us to be in a lifegiving relationship. The resurrection is proof God loves us and wants to set us free from everything that limits and binds us, even death itself. That's how far God was willing to go to show love.

**This means we always have hope.** As John puts it, "*Even if our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts and knows all things*" (1 John 3:20). When we practice real love, that's the way to shut down self-criticism, even when there is something to it. God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves.

**When we no longer accuse or condemn ourselves, we're given the boldness and freedom to be ourselves before God.** And that gives us the freedom to be ourselves before all people. You are a child of God. No one can say otherwise. That is part of our identity.

**You may ask "how do we practice real love"?** John helps us. We show our real love when we do what pleases God, "*We believe in the name of Jesus Christ and love each other*" (1 John 3:22).

**Living a life of love each day is the way to be free.** That's because we all go through ups and downs in our Christian faith. Whatever the struggle - whether outside of us or inside - we often feel ourselves blown about by the winds of emotion or circumstances. God calls us to lives of increasing consistency, with the evidence of our inner transformation becoming more and more apparent as the months and years pass by.

**How would you characterize your relationship with God - consistent and fruitful, or sporadic and parched?** John knew we would never find the faithfulness God requires by ourselves. We are to place complete trust in the work and grace of God, believing God will conform us to the image of Jesus. The sense of being grounded in God only comes when we set aside our sin in the pursuit of the one true God. Or, in the words of John, "*if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us*" (1 John 4:12).

**You don't need to search any more. Embrace God's love, share it with others and be free.**

**1 John 3:16-24 (CEB)**

This is how we know love: Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. But if someone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but refuses to help - how can the love of God dwell in a person like that?

Little children, let's not love with words or speech but with action and truth. This is how we will know that we belong to the truth and reassure our hearts in God's presence. Even if our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts and knows all things.

Dear friends, if our hearts don't condemn us, we have confidence in relationship to God. We receive whatever we ask from him because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. This is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love each other as he commanded us. Those who keep his commandments dwell in God and God dwells in them. This is how we know that he dwells in us, because of the Spirit he has given us.