

Electrify the Fence

1 John
4:20-21

With George
7/06/26pm

I am thankful that I grew up in the Peak District surrounded by rolling hills with family walks through and around fields where sheep, cows, donkeys and the odd alpaca were grazing. Fences around fields are generally boring and we have no need to touch them but when you're 8 years old and you learn that a fence is electric, then suddenly the fence becomes very interesting and if you can't persuade your siblings to touch it, then you simply have to touch it yourself. It's a universal constant. Fences are a must for animals. They protect the animals on the inside, from other animals who are outside. They keep the animals safe by limiting their wandering and from eating plants that could harm them. Fences are important for the health and livelihood of everyone.

'Sitting on the fence' is a British idiom for not making a decision to land on either side of a point of view. This position is quite popular as it feels as though we can somehow get the best of both sides, but the truth is, you get the worst of both. Think about a sheep doing this in a field, the sheep won't get the protection of being inside the fence and it doesn't get the freedom of being outside the fence. Most of the time, sitting on the fence is not good, so what is the easiest way to keep the sheep off? Electrify the fence! If someone is sitting on the fence, having one foot in and one foot out, how do you get them to land on one side or the other? You electrify the fence. This is what the Holy Spirit is doing through John in our passage today. His language is strong. It is clear cut and there is no wiggle room. We read, "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. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister" The fence is electrified.

1. Familiar Territory. John's wording is familiar in this letter and it is direct. "If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth." You can claim something all you want, but if how you live does not support that claim, you're a liar. In 1 John 1:6 the claim is having fellowship with God, and the disproof of this claim is living in darkness. In 1 John 4:20, the claim is loving God, and the disproof of that claim is hating a brother or sister. The two are then linked together even closer as we move on through the letter. It is written, "Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness." (1 Jon 2:9) So you can claim to be in the light all you want, but if your love for your brother or sister does not show that, you're in darkness. Therefore, according to 1 John 1:6, if we're not living out the truth we can't have fellowship with God and if you're still unsure whether hating your brother or sister is that big of a thing, look at chapter 3:15. "Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him." The distinction is colossal, "This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister." (1Jn 3:10) This is the word of God. It is that big of a deal because God has made it so by saying it again and again in different ways. Today's passage contains nothing that John has not said before.

There are so many different ways you can view your hand: X-rays, MRIs. We can't say we know our hand if we just know what it looks like on the front and back. The Holy Spirit, through John, is doing the same thing. John comes back again and again with a different nuance because it is so important and the voltage in the fence rises. By the time you get to 1 John 4:20 to 21, you can't sit on the fence. You're in or you're out. You love God and live it or, you're a child of the devil. (3:10) You're not IN if you're ON! Eternal life in Christ or eternal damnation in hell. This is why every angle is given. This is why it is a loving act to electrify the fence.

In society today we're told that loving someone is allowing them to think, to do and to act in any way they want. And if we challenge them, then that isn't loving. Is it loving to put a fence around sheep to limit their movement, to stop them eating something poisonous. Yes! Is it loving to tell people that they are walking in darkness and they need to repent yes! But with just one caveat, loving someone is speaking the truth to them graciously. This is why John writes our verses today. "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. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister. That is love.”

2. The Seen Unseen. “For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.” (v20) If people cannot carry out the lesser requirement (to love their fellow believers, whom they have seen), they cannot carry out the greater requirement. We can be sure that we love our unseen God by the way that we love our seen brothers and sisters. This in fact, makes our unseen God, seen.

We’re all about Jesus. We are called to make Jesus seen by how we live and love. This is how we make the unseen, seen. This is how we experience the unseen God. This is how others see and experience the unseen God. In John 13:34-35 Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” This love keeps no record of wrong. It is manifest by the Holy Spirit, in his people. “by this [kind of love] everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (13:34) Because others have seen Jesus Christ in us as we love one another they have seen the unseen. Ebenezer is such a loving place to be. People are seen and known and rejoiced with and mourned with. That kind of love is so Christ-like. Who wouldn’t want to be part of that!?! Where there is lovelessness in the church, it is sadly a stumbling block and in effect, makes evangelism useless. People will see through our evangelistic attempts and see the lack of love. Are we living the good news that we are sharing? I want to see Mold reached with the gospel. As they come to church they can see Christ in the way that we love one another. Revival starts with Spirit-powered, gospel-love. So the final question is this...

3. How Do We Love? “And he has given us this command: “Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.” (v21) If we are commanded to love then it means it doesn’t come naturally. Loving our friends is easy, we’ve chosen them. Loving our family, at times, might be more difficult, but loving our brothers and sisters in Christ, (not just tolerating them, or being civil) but truly loving them needs to be commanded. But the wonderful truth is, it is not just a command that we have to salute, grit our teeth and get on with, it is a command that we are enabled and equipped for. When we ask the question, ‘how do we love our brother and sister?’ we have to go back a few verses to 4:9. We read, “This 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 teaches us that God out of pure love for us, sent His Son to us. Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us. And Jesus, as he lived, lived out this kind of love. His disciples who deserted him, when He was suffering his greatest, went back to them and loved them. Jesus prayed for forgiveness for the soldiers who crucified him. But not only did Jesus model this true, amazing, God-displaying love, he made it possible for us. Through faith in his atoning death we might receive forgiveness and his righteousness can be ours and we can now know God and experience his love. A love that goes beyond what we deserve. That high price, that death of Jesus, was counted worth it by God. We are recipients of loving grace. And as we have received such loving grace, we can now extend it to our fellow brothers and sisters. Not only did Jesus model this love in his life on earth but we are adopted into his family and have the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, working in us the desire, the power, the will and the joy of this kind of love. If you love someone they will know it, and if they don’t know it, dare I say it, you don’t love them. So loving them requires us to know them and for them to know us. Be gracious with one another and reconcile quickly when there is offence. Love doesn’t mean best buddies nor does it mean tolerate. We look out for one another’s interests and seek that they be blessed. As you pray through the members list, ask the Lord to help you love them. “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.” (3:17) Do we know our brothers and sisters enough to know their needs so we can love in action, and not just words? Words are easy, putting our hand in our pocket, swallowing our pride, forgiving, giving our time is hard and costly. We can’t sit on such an electrified fence. We can’t say we love God and not love our brothers and sisters. Because if we do that, we’re not in the field. We’re not in Christ. What a gift the fence of Christ is. Safe in Him. Safe from whatever the world can bring, and safe from wandering. May you be reassured by your love for your brothers and sisters that you really do know God.