

1 John 4:7-21

Are you an avid baseball fan? Or are you like me, I like attending the games but if the game's on tv, it's background noise that I occasionally look up to see what is happening? Something I discovered that has made the game more interesting is the pitch clock. It was introduced in 2023 to make the game shorter and more exciting.

Now pitchers are given only 15 seconds to begin their pitch and hitters have to be ready to hit by the 8 second mark. Evidently this is quite different from earlier times when the pitcher could take as long as they wanted to get the ball thrown, and batters could take their time getting ready to hit the ball. The funny thing is that it works to shorten the game, to keep it more exciting and on track.

For centuries, God's people lived by complex religious regulations: The Ten Commandments, laws about clean and unclean foods, rules about ritual and moral holiness. The regulations went on and on and on and were just as hard to follow as a baseball game that lasts more than three hours. But then, God's love was revealed in Jesus. The compassion and mercy of God became visible through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. This inspired John to offer a new rule to the followers of Jesus in the first century: "Let us love one another, because love is from God" (1 John 4:7). This change came from the discovery that love is the very heart of God's will for our lives.

John knew that love was part of following God for many years. In fact, the commandment, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself," was first introduced in the book of Leviticus (19:18). But the game changed when God chose to put a human face — the face of Jesus Christ — on the commandment. "God's love was revealed among us in this way," said John: "God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:9–10).

So why was this change necessary? The problem with the love commandment in Leviticus was that it could easily become a matter of endless philosophical debates. So, John changed the rule by attaching it to the sacrifice of Christ. Now, when we look at Jesus on the cross, we see the love of God for us. We discover that even before we could express our love, God showed love by sending Jesus to be an "atoning sacrifice for our sins" (v. 10). Jesus died to show God's love for us, and to restore the relationship with God that had been broken by our sins. Now, when we look at Jesus, we see God's love revealed. We see the loving face of God.

Like the introduction of the pitch clock, this change had a powerful effect. "Beloved, since God loved us so much," said John, "we also ought to love one another" (v. 11). Suddenly, the love of God in Jesus became more than a good idea. It became a vivid illustration of how we are to love. In addition, John found that God helps us when we attempt to love. "God abides in us," he said, "and his love is perfected in us" (v. 12). With this intervention, we can be confident that God is with us and working through us. Our love gets faster and stronger because it is based on the activity of God. New Testament professor C. Clifton Black says, "God's love for us is the source of our power to love God and one another."

"We love because he first loved us," said John. God's love is the source of our power, making it possible for us to love. The result, said John, is that those "who love God must love their brothers and sisters also" (vv. 19, 21). When we show this kind of love, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us.

The rules began to change when God's love was revealed in Jesus. With the arrival of Christ, the compassion and mercy of God became visible to the world. Then God promised to live in us and perfect his love in us, so that we would be able to love one another without fear. This transformation occurred when John discovered that love is the heart of God's identity. John captured this fact in three simple but profound words: "God is love" (vv. 8, 16). Think about this. Not only does Jesus reveal God's love, but Jesus reveals that God is love. That's a game changer.

In the novel *City of Peace*, a pastor named Harley Camden makes a visit to jail to see a Muslim inmate named Muhammad Bayati, accused of murdering his daughter. The two begin to talk about their beliefs, and Muhammad says, "God is merciful and just." "God is also love," adds Harley. "Our Bible says that God is love." Muhammad cocks his head slightly. "That is different from our understanding. We have many names for God, but love is not among them."

"For Christians, love is at the core of who God is," explains Harley. "God reveals his love by sending Jesus to bring us forgiveness and new life. And the response we are supposed to make is to love one another — a love that should be extended to friends, enemies, blacks, whites, Muslims, Jews, fellow Christians. It is all supposed to come down to love. In fact, the Bible insists that those who say, 'I love God' but hate their brothers and sisters, are liars." "I would agree with that," says Muhammad. "Loving God does require that we love the people around us."

Like baseball, religion is reluctant to change. Many people of faith prefer to play by traditional rules and are nervous about innovations that run counter to their understandings. As Muhammad says to Harley, "We have many names for God, but love is not among them." If we have multiple names for God, why do we need any more? Religion, like baseball, is not comfortable with change.

Traditional baseball fans were not happy about the pitch clock when it was first proposed. "Baseball is a timeless game," they would argue. "It is the only game without a clock, and it will last as long as it needs to last." A clock was not part of their understanding, even though most of them wanted the game to move more quickly. "They craved more action and offense," says Leibovich; "more balls hit into play; more doubles, triples, and stolen bases."

Then the innovation of the pitch clock was introduced. It was a game changer, and a good one. In the same way, John came along and said, "God is love," changing the Christian faith forever. This assertion, "God is love," is a powerful "pacemaker" to regulate our heartbeat, keep us spiritually healthy and inspire us to "love one another" just as God has loved us (v. 11). As Harley says to Muhammad, "It is all supposed to come down to love."

Yes, "love one another" is the heart of our faith. Because "God is love ... those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (v. 16). To abide is to live or to dwell in something — to accept, observe and follow a particular path. For John, to love God is to love our brothers and sisters, and to abide in love is to abide in God with no distinction between the two. This is a whole new approach to faith, based on the love of God in Christ, and the love that God has for each one of us. Practice your faith with the principle God is love and you will be focused on action, your faith will be exciting and engaging. Once you "love one another" you'll never want to go back to the way it was before.

All glory be to God.