Love was always part of God’s playbook. As early as Leviticus, we hear the command, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18). But the game changed dramatically when God chose to put the human face of Jesus on the commandment. “God’s love was revealed among us in this way,” said John: “God sent [God’s] only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that [God] loved us and sent [God’s] Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9–10).

Not everyone was a fan of this game-changing law of love. Many people would say, “We like the game the way it is!” A religion of rules and consequences makes sense to us. The problem with the love commandment is that it could easily become a matter of endless debates, like discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of baseball’s pitch clock. So, John amended 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 great love for us, and to restore the relationship with God broken by our sins. When we look at Jesus, we see God’s love revealed. We see the loving face of God expressed in dramatic (and tragic) form.

Like the pitch clock, the law of love had a powerful effect. “Beloved, since God loved us so much,” said John, “we also ought to love one another” (v. 11). The love of God made manifest in Jesus becomes more than just a good idea: it becomes a pattern for how we ought to love one another. John found that God helps us when we attempt to love like this. “God abides in us,” he said, “and [God’s] love is perfected in us” (v. 12). God’s love for us, shown in our redemption at the cross, means we can be confident that God is with us and will work through us. Our love becomes quicker to manifest and more potent because it is modeled on the activity of God toward us. 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.

Everything changed when God revealed God’s love in Jesus; we saw the compassion and mercy of God made real. And God promised to live in us and perfect God’s love in us, so we would be able to love one another. This transformational love is the heart of God’s identity. John captured this fact in three simple but profound words: “God is love” (vv. 8, 16). Not only does Jesus reveal God’s love, Jesus reveals God *is* love. It’s a game changer!

In the novel *City of Peace*, pastor Harley Camden visits 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 a change-averse game. 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 slow to adapt to change.

Traditional baseball fans hated the pitch clock when 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.” Which is all well and good, but baseball games can drag on if not regulated.

The pitch clock is truly a game changer and a good one. In the same game changing way, John saying that “God is love,” transformed 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 loves us (v. 11). As Richard Rohr explains: “Most of us were taught that God would love us if and when we change. In fact, God loves you so that you can change. What empowers change, what makes you desirous of change, is the inner experience of love. This alone becomes the engine of positive change.”

“God is love.” This is a hallmark of Christian theology. Expounding on this thought, Augustine made a wordplay that forever altered Christian theology: “God is love,” he said, but “love is also God.” Augustine defined sin as misdirected love. To love something apart from God is sinful because it ruptures the subject or object from its relationship to, and with, God. More specifically, sin is “acting contrary to the commandment of love.” If you are more concerned with your own life or your own goods; if you refuse to serve others or maintain an exclusivism that prevents communion and relationship with others; you are acting contrary to the law of love and are therefore in a state of sin.

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 abide is to accept, observe and follow a particular path. For John, to prove that we love God means we love our brothers and sisters. To abide in love is to abide in God with no distinction between the two. This is a whole new approach to the faith game, based on the love of God in Christ, and the love that God has for each one of us.

“Love one another” is the heart of God’s new ballgame. If you feel your Christian game has a lagging heartbeat, install the “God is love” pitch clock, and let it help you to love your brothers and sisters. This change will draw you closer to God and to the people around you. It will focus you on the action, and keep you excited and engaged. Once you “love one another,” you will never want to go back to the way the game was played before.

Let me finish with this story. A farmer placed a weathervane inscribed with the words “God is love” on top of his barn. One day a traveler stopped by the farm and watched the weathervane moving with the breeze. Then, with a smirk on his face, he asked, “Do you mean to say that your God is as changeable as the wind?” The farmer shook his head and replied, “No. What I mean to say is that no matter which way the wind blows, God is love!”

Prayer: God, who is love, we praise you for your love which is given so freely; and we thank you for believing that we could learn to offer such love to each other. May we love as You love us, in Christ’s name. Amen.

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**A Whole New Ballgame**

Sunday, April 28, 2024 [1 John 4:7-21](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+John+4%3a7-21&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

The longest recorded game in Majoy League Baseball clocked in at 8 hours and six minutes. The Chicago White Sox and the Milwaukee Brewers slugged it out through 25 innings over two days. They started the game on May 8, 1984, stopped the game at 1:00 AM, and finished the game later that day, May 9, 1984. The White Sox beat the Brewers 7-6. An eight-hour ballgame is rare, but the length of baseball games did steadily increase, reaching an average of 3.5 hours.

By comparison, the NY Yankees baseball game on opening day this year took just 2 hours and 33 minutes to play. The relative brevity of games these days is thanks to the pitch clock, introduced in 2023. The pitch clock is part of an effort to move play along and make baseball games shorter and more exciting. The pitch clock is “a kind of pacemaker to reregulate the game’s lagging heartbeat,” writes Mark Leibovich (*The Atlantic*, July-August 2023). Pitchers are now “allowed just 15 seconds to begin their motion to deliver the baseball to home plate,” he explains; hitters “have to be set in the batter’s box by the 8-second mark.” With the pitch clock, it is a whole new ballgame

The pitch clock might seem like a small adjustment, but it represents a radical change. Previously, pitchers could take as long as they wanted between throws, and batters could shuffle around endlessly in the batter’s box. “The goal is to curtail dead time,” says Leibovich, “the endless velcroing and re-velcroing of batting gloves and strolling around the mound.” And it works! We are now seeing a whole new ballgame, one that is faster and more thrilling!

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, like a baseball game that goes for eight hours; but then, God revealed God’s love in Jesus. The compassion and mercy of God, seen visible through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, inspired John the Evangelist 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). Discovering that love is the very heart of God’s will for our lives is a gamechanger. God is not about rules and punishment, but all about love and grace. This is a whole new ballgame for us.