

We are making our way through the first letter of John. We have seen his instructions to walk in the light of God's word and love for each other. We have seen his warnings against false teachers. Last week we looked at his instructions to live as children of God, reflecting the character and holiness of our Father in our attitudes and actions. It ended with the statement that anyone who does not love his brother is not a child of God. This week John continues and builds on this topic of love.

He has been warning us to hold fast to the truth and the message that has been handed down to us. Now, he comes around to defining the heart of that message. "*We should love one another.*" (v.11) John continues the pattern we saw last week of helping define what he means by setting opposites against each other and talking about each in turn. He does not switch as quickly or as often in this passage, however.

Having identified the message as the instruction to love one another, John immediately contrasts the message to the way the world works. In the context of love among brothers, there is no better contrast than that of **Cain**.

We all remember the story from Genesis chapter 4. John reminds us of the outline of the story in this morning's text. Cain and Abel were brothers. They each offered a sacrifice to God. Cain offered the fruit of his labor, the work of his hands. Abel offered the best of his flock. God was pleased with Abel's sacrifice, but not

with Cain's. Cain got angry. God pointed out Cain's anger and told him to be careful and get control of it. Instead, Cain took his brother for a walk in the field and killed him there. As John points out, the problem wasn't anything Abel did. Abel was completely innocent. Cain's problem was that he was angry with everyone else because his attitude was wrong and his actions were sinful. In keeping with last week's text, John says this identified Cain as belonging to the evil one. When the world is confronted with its sin, it lashes out against the **messenger**. It wants to kill God, but it is often just smart enough to know trying would be a mistake, so it goes for God's messenger instead. As the world moves further from God it grows more and more bold and eventually will shake its fist in God's face.

Just as Jesus had before him, John tells us not to be surprised if the world hates us. We don't even have to point out their sin. The fact that we exist, living holy and pure lives, will make them aware of their sin. The world talks about love and peace, but it is fueled by hatred and animosity.

John says we know we are not of the world, that we have passed from death into life, because we express love for our brothers. If we do not love those who are in the church, then we are still spiritually dead in our sins. If we hate others who are in the church, then God counts us as murderers and there is no eternal life in us.

Having called us to measure our selves in the light of love, and having used love to define the message handed down to us, John now sets out to define love. Verse 16 says, "*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay*

*down our lives for our brothers.*” When it comes to love, Jesus has set the example, and He has done it in the most difficult way imaginable. Love is not **easy**. We are called to a very difficult task.

As I have said time and time before, love as God commands it and the Bible describes it is not an emotion. It is a pattern of behavior. Throughout this passage, and the letter of which it is a part, John uses one word, and one word alone, when he talks about love. It is “agape.” This is a sacrificial love. It is a decision, and the subsequent actions, that put the other person’s needs ahead of your own. It is the determination to act for their benefit, even when doing so may bring harm to you. It’s clearest definition is given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. Paul also defined it in much the same way John did in his letter to the Romans. Paul wrote, “*You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” (Romans 5:6-8) God went through pain and suffering in order to reduce as much as He could our pain and suffering. That is love, especially when you remember we were God’s enemies when He did it.

Isn’t that what the cross was all about? Jesus did not die on the cross for us because we were God’s friends, were doing everything right and deserved a break. Jesus died because we were God’s enemies, we could do nothing right, and He decided to redeem us for Himself anyway. There was nothing about us that should attract God to us. On the other hand, Jesus

certainly didn’t deserve to die. It wasn’t His sin or misbehavior that put Him up there. And hanging on the cross wasn’t something He was really eager and looking forward to doing. God loves us because He **chooses** to, and we should love each other for the same reason—we choose to obey His command and love the people He loves.

It was Jesus’ love for us that led Him to choose the cross, ignoring the shame associated with it, so that we might be brought into relationship with the Father. Jesus willingly died because we deserve death and He doesn’t want us to die. He took our place—good news for us, pain and death for Him. That is love. That is what God means when He says He is a loving God.

It is on this basis, because Christ, in His love, laid down His life for us, that we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. John opens a very difficult question for us with this statement. How much are you willing to suffer for the benefit of the other people in this congregation? If you are a member here, the question is even more important because you have covenanted and promised to uphold God’s word in this body. We promise to love one another. This is what it means. What are we as individuals willing to give so that those around us might suffer less?

John says we ought to share the things we own. It’s the first thing he said after writing that we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. There ought to be nobody in the church who is struggling for food or for a roof over their head. This is not to say the church goes on indefinitely taking care of people who are lazy and refuse to work. That is not love. But we are called to

ensure that each person has what they need to live and serve God. If someone needs something that we have, we are called to share it with them. If we have no pity or concern for each other, how can we say that we know the God who has showered such love and care on us?

John's call to love our fellow believers the way God loves them takes us beyond talking about our concern for each other to actually starting to act in ways that sacrifice things important to us for the benefit of the others in our church. This is why we take up a benevolence offering each month right before we share communion.

Our love for each other, and for God, needs to go beyond just sharing our financial and material resources, however. John mentioned them because he knew about greed and the strong hold our money and possessions have on us. But love for one another goes beyond just passing things around the fellowship. If we are to love each other with actions and in truth, then we have to be willing to give up our agendas, our positions, our status, and all the other things that are important to us as well. Loving one another in the truth means that the well being of the people in the congregation, their spiritual health and growth in the grace of God, is the most important thing to us. It means we are willing to set aside what we want to happen, or the positions we want to hold, so that God can have His way in us and in the congregation.

This is often frightening to us because loving one another means we have to give up **control**. Each of us is born with a desire to control his or her own destiny and influence those around us. As we said at Bible study on Wednesday evening, this works its way out in the fact

that people tend to be master manipulators in order to bend others to our will. Loving the other members in the church means that we bow our will to God's, we give up the illusion that we are in control, and we let the Holy Spirit guide us where, when, and how He will. To try to manipulate the church into doing what we want is not love, no matter how good we think our intentions are.

Loving, really acting in ways that are good for one another regardless of their impact on us, is an evidence that we belong to the **truth**. When we can do the things we have been talking about—when God's agenda replaces ours, when we set aside our desires for the spiritual growth and strength of each other—then we can rest in God's presence because we belong to the truth. This change in motivation, from our benefit and desires to each others' benefit and God's desires, is one of the surest signs we are God's and no longer belong to this world.

Even when our hearts condemn us we have the witness of the love in us. We do not always feel saved. We slip and fall into sin. The world seeks to pull us in so many different directions. Satan still whispers to us that we are not good enough and that God will not forgive our sins, or that we cannot serve, in order to make us ineffective. All of these can be offset by the change God brings about in us. If we are doing things because we want to serve God and help those around us grow in Him, then we have strong evidence that we belong to Him even when our hearts tell us otherwise. God is greater than our hearts. There is nothing hidden from His view. He knew all our sin when He saved us, and He chose, in His love, to save us anyway. If we love

each other in the same way, then we can ignore it when our hearts condemn us because we have God's witness that we are His.

Likewise, if our hearts and consciences are clear before God, we have all the more confidence. If we listen to His voice and do what He says, if we are in His will and submitted to it, then we have anything we ask from Him. One of the reasons we do not see God move more often is that we are not obedient to His will and to do what pleases Him. We spend too much time pleasing ourselves. We put too much energy and effort into our agendas and doing things the way we think they ought to be done. If we really want to see God move in our midst we need to get our sin out of His way.

As we draw to the end of this morning's text, John gives us a couple of sentences that deserve sermons in their own right. We do not have the time to give them all they deserve, but let's look at them as best we can.

After reminding us that God responds to those who are in His will and obedient to Him, John wrote, "*And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.*" (v.23) This is a two part command. First we have to **believe** in Jesus Christ. Part of the problem with the modern church is that we have been so eager to get people in that we have forgotten the church is the body of believers. It's not that we think we are better than the people around us. It's that we know we are not. Yet we fill our membership rolls with people who have not given any evidence that their motivation has changed—who do think they are better. Our churches are filled with people who love with words or tongue

only because they are not filled with the love of God because they have no part in Christ. These commands, this whole letter, only works for those who are redeemed by Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit. This must come first or the second part will be impossible.

The second part of the command is to love one another, just as **Jesus** told us. This is impossible without the first part, but it also naturally flows from it. If we believe and are filled with the Holy Spirit, we will want to love each other. John is telling us to give into our new and better tendencies. We want to obey Jesus. We want to love the people He loves. We want to sacrifice ourselves for them, just as He sacrificed Himself for us.

This brings us to the end of the morning's text, and a key part of it. "*Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.*" (v.24) We've alluded to it several times, but now John says it clearly. We know we are in Christ by the Spirit He gave us. We have already talked about the fact that our hearts can condemn us even when we are right with God. John gives us a clear instruction here to know whether or not we are in Christ. We are in Christ if we obey Him because of the influence of the Holy Spirit in us. Paul tells us, "*The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.*" (Romans 8:16) We can't be controlled by subjective feelings. At the same time, we ought to feel, due to the inner working of the Holy Spirit, that we are saved and belong to Christ. In addition to being able to see the changes in our lives that everyone else can see, we ought to know we are saved because we know the voice of the Holy Spirit tells us we are.