



Sunday School Lesson for March 11, 2007
Released on March 7, 2007

"The Test of Love"

Printed Text: 1 John 3:11-24
Background Scripture: 1 John 3:1-24
Devotional Reading: 1 Corinthians 13

1 John 3:11-24

11 For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

12 Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.

13 Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you.

14 We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.

15 Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him.

16 Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

17 But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?

18 My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.

19 And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him.

20 For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things.

21 Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God.

22 And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.

23 And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment.

24 And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us.

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Recite 1 John 3:16 from memory.
2. Compare and contrast John 3:16 with 1 John 3:16.

Introduction

One of the major themes of the New Testament is love. Among the ancient Greeks there were several words for love. One word connoted romantic love, another family love, and another love between friends.

There was, however, one word that was rarely used among the secular Greeks: agape. Appearing in its various forms about fifty times in 1 John, it most often is used for God's love for us and the love we are to have for one another. Compared to the other kinds of human love, agape is more likely to involve self-sacrifice.

When asked about the greatest commandment, Christ quoted the Law, which declared that we are to love both God and our neighbor (Mark 12:28-34; cf. Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). When addressing the problem of misusing spiritual gifts in the Corinthian church, Paul established that love is the proper motivation for Christian service (1 Cor. 13).

While love is one of the most talked about teachings of Christ, it may be one of the least practiced. The Lord Jesus said, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35).

Lesson Background

John wrote this epistle against a background of false teachers who came to be known as gnostics. Among other things, gnostics taught that it did not really matter if a person had morality or love—as long as he or she had "secret knowledge." To combat this false teaching, John emphasized the interconnection of right belief, right actions, and right love. To put it another way, it is the right involvement of head, hands, and heart. The child of God must believe the truth, obey the commands, and love the brethren.

Of these three areas, John's clear favorite is the emphasis on love (although they cannot really be separated). In last week's lesson John equated the life of love with walking in the light. Today he will examine God's love, the world's lack of love, and the saints' love that meets every test.

Supportive Love (1 John 3:11-15)

1. What did John mean by the "beginning" (1 John 3:11)?

To remind his readers that they were to love one another, John stated that this was not a new revelation. This was the "message" they had "heard from the beginning."

Here, the word "beginning" does not mean the beginning of the world. Rather, it refers to the beginning of the readers' acquaintance with the Lord Jesus Christ and their acceptance of the gospel (Acts 11:15; Phil. 4:15).

The command to love one another is not new to the Christian, yet we must be reminded frequently of the importance of showing Christian love in all our actions, attitudes, and words.

2. Why did Cain kill his brother? How were his works evil? (v. 12)

The infamous Cain is remembered because he was the world's first murderer. (Gen. 4:8-15). While the account in Genesis does not specifically mention the devil, it is evident that Cain was inspired by Satan, who is here called the "wicked one" (1 John 3:12). Indeed, all evil in the world has its origins in Satan's influence, for the devil was a "murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44) and the father of lies.

Genesis tells us that Cain was angry because God accepted Abel and Cain was rejected. Even when the Lord gave Cain the opportunity to repent and offer an acceptable sacrifice, he refused. Instead, he rose up against his brother and killed him. This was "because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous" (1 John 3:12).

"Note that Cain and Abel, being brothers, had the same parents, and they both brought sacrifices to God. Cain is not presented as an atheist; he is presented as a worshipper. And this is the point: children of the devil masquerade as true believers. They attend religious gatherings, as Cain did. They may even bring offerings. But these actions in themselves are not valid proof that a man is born of God. The real test is his love for the brethren-and here Cain failed" (Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Victor).

3. Why should we not be surprised if the world hates us? (v. 13)

Christians should not be surprised if they are hated by the world. After all, the world hated Christ and sought to destroy Him. Christ said, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18). Obviously, we cannot expect any better treatment than the Lord Jesus received.

Christ even warned the apostles that a time was coming when those who killed them would think they were rendering a service to God (16:2). In fact, we should expect to be persecuted for our faith. Paul warned Timothy, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12). If we are not persecuted, then we need to check ourselves. We need to ask whether we are living as Christians or blending in with the world. Remember, we can either please the world or God, not both (cf. James 4:4).

4. How have believers "passed from death unto life"? (v. 14)

One of the key words in both the Gospel of John and his first epistle is the word "life." John usually did not mean physical life but spiritual life, which is eternal and found in Christ (John 10:10).

While eternal life is often depicted as that which will be received in the future (Titus 3:7), John stated that this "life" is the present possession of the saints. The words of 1 John 3:14 are quite similar to John 5:24: "He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life."

Loving the brethren is one of the ways we know we are in a redeemed relationship with Christ (1 John 3:14). When we do not show our love for our fellow Christians, it reveals that we abide in death, which is estrangement from God.

5. How does John compare hate to murder? (v. 15)

John uses very strong language to tell his readers that those who have hatred toward fellow believers are as guilty as if they had actually committed murder. Hatred in the heart precedes the outward act of murder. The only thing that keeps some people from actually committing murder is fear of prison or execution.

Though it is unlikely that John's audience had not literally committed murder, they had possibly committed murder in their hearts. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ made a similar declaration concerning anger (Matt. 5:21-22).

"Hating is the root; murdering is the fruit. Both share the same results, alienation. Both will share the same eternal consequences, condemnation" (Station, *Life in the Son*, College Press).

Hatred is a form of murder, John was clear in stating the eternal ramifications of hatred, for "no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:15).

This does not mean that murder is an unpardonable sin. Some well-known heroes of faith were guilty of murder, such as Moses (Exod. 2:11-14), David (2 Sam. 11:14-17), and Paul (Acts 22:4, 26:10). All of them were forgiven, though. John was telling his readers the seriousness of hatred. Hatred makes it impossible to maintain a relationship with God. Tragically, some who profess faith in Christ exhibit murderous attitudes toward others.

Sacrificial Love (1 John 3:16-18)

6. What is the supreme example of God's love towards us? (v. 16)

The primary way we know God loves us is that Christ "laid down his life for us" (3:16). There is no greater manifestation of God's love for sinners than the death of Christ on Calvary (John 10:11; Rom 5:8; Eph. 5:25; cf. John 3:16). "The example of God and Christ should inflame our hearts with this holy love" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary*).

Since Christ set the supreme example of sacrificial love, Christians are enjoined to "lay down [their] lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16). While this may include literally giving one's life for a fellow believer, there are other ways we can make sacrifices for fellow Christians. Helping those in need is certainly an appropriate way to do this. The important thing to remember is that we need to put other people ahead of ourselves. That is the essence of sacrificial, or *agape*, love.

7. How can Christians show God's love toward those in need? (v. 17-18).

Nearly all Christians affirm that we should love one another. Practically speaking, though, how can we claim to have God's love without showing compassion towards Christians who are needy? John was quite clear. Those who have been blessed with material possessions must share with brothers in need.

There are those who take advantage of the charitable spirit of their fellow brethren, and aiding the lazy will not encourage them to improve their situation (2 Thess. 3:8-12). In those cases, we need to be in prayer so that God can show us their hearts. We must let God guide us in determining whether someone is actually in need or is actually being lazy.

There are nevertheless needy people who can and should be helped by their Christian brethren. This may include people who are sick, out of work, or otherwise suffering financially. We need to reach out and help those people, for in this way we are ministering to Jesus Christ Himself (Matt. 25:31-46). Although our primary concern should be for the family of faith, others should not be excluded (Gal. 6:10).

Our love for others must be shown "in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18), not just in telling them we care. Concrete action must backup our affirmation of God's love living in our hearts. As James 2:15-16 asks, "If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?"

Sincere Love (1 John 3:19-24)

8. Why is confidence in the heart important to both salvation and prayer? Can we trust our feelings regarding salvation? (v. 19-21)

Another key word in John's writings is "truth." Whereas the Gnostic false teachers claimed to know the truth, John wanted his readers to be assured of the truth that can come only from faith in Christ. He alone is "the way, the truth, and the life"

(John 14:6). As Christ said, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (8:32).

Those who are truly redeemed have a confidence in their hearts that only God can give. Indeed, the Holy Spirit testifies with our spirits that we are God's children (Rom. 8:16). This is not just a matter of emotions, however. The feeling of assurance is based on faith, which in turn is based on the facts of the gospel. Claiming salvation based on feelings alone is to cast aside the objective truths of the gospel found in the Bible. Remember, you may not always "feel" that you are saved, but if you have accepted Christ as Lord and Savior, then you are saved. The enemy can use emotions to deceive us, but the word of God is the solid rock that will never change.

"When God, who is greater than our conscience and pronounces a more authoritative verdict, one based on perfect knowledge of us and of all relevant circumstances, assures us of the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake, we enjoy peace of conscience" (Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, Eerdmans).

9. Why is it important to keep God's commandments? How does this relate to prayer? (v. 22-24)

Lest any of his readers get the idea that assurance of salvation is based solely on an inner conviction, John went on to stress the importance of obedience to God's commands. "Obedience to the Lord's commandments is not the cause but the proof of His people's dwelling in Him" (Bruce). Once a person has received Christ, that person is free to live in righteousness, not sin. A Christian living in sin demeans the grace of God (Rom. 6:1-2), which teaches us to "live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world" (Titus 2:12). Christian liberty is not the license to sin; it is the freedom to do what pleases God.

The fact that Christians "keep his commandments and do those things that are pleasing in his sight" (1 John 3:22) gives not only confidence in the heart but also confidence before God's throne. "Let us come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:16).

Petitions that are in according with God's will, will be granted. "This is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us" (1 John 5:14). "But if they are guilt-ridden and conscience-stricken, rather than seeking the fellowship or enjoying it, they will flee the presence of God and will not dare seek answers to prayers that he alone can provide" (Barker and Kohlenberger, eds., *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Zondervan).

10. In what ways can we know that a person is indwelt by the Spirit? (v. 24)

Believing in Christ, loving one another, and obeying His commandments-are all important facets of the Christian life. To this John added that the presence of the Holy Spirit is evidence of God's indwelling presence in the believer (3:24). Scripture testifies that God's Spirit has taken residence in the redeemed (Acts 2:38; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 6:19; Gal 3:2).

Although the Holy Spirit lives in the Christian, it is possible to grieve Him (Eph. 4:30) and quench His power (1 Thess. 5:19) in our lives. The evidence of the Spirit's presence is the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

The most important thing to remember in this lesson is that those who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit will be obedient to God and show sincere love towards the brethren and the lost souls.

Conclusion - Love: The Commencement

The context of 1 John suggests many ways that love can be put to work. We can show our love for God by committing ourselves to His Son and clinging to the truth of His Word. If we truly love God, we will not dishonor His Son by lazy discipleship (Hebrews 6:12). If we truly love God, we will not allow false teachings against His Word to stand (1 Timothy 6:3-5). Love and light must walk hand in hand.

We also show our love for God by loving His children. God wants us to combine our love for Him with our love for one another. This kind of shared love is what characterizes living in God's community—the church. Our love for one another is to be genuine and practical. Mere lip service cannot feed the hungry or clothe the naked. Real love is always ready to reach out.

Finally, we can show our love for God and His church by "talking up" our eagerness to go to Heaven. It is not a cop-out on this world to be eager to go to the next. When Jesus returns and we are suddenly, gloriously changed, we will live forever in fellowship with God, Jesus, and all our fellow saints. If we really treasure the reward of Heaven, we will want to bring the lost into the community of the saved. Inviting someone to join us on the road to Heaven is the ultimate expression of loving one another.

Prayer

Our Father, we cannot thank You enough for the love that has allowed us to be called Your children! Your people have rejected You time and time again over the course of many centuries. Yet You were working through it all to bring Your plan to fruition: the redemption of humans from the quagmire of self-inflicted sin.

Forgive us for sometimes treating Your great love so casually. Help us to honor Your love by reflecting it toward one another. In the name of Jesus, amen.

Thought to Remember

Love must act.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

Note that verses 8 and 16 of next text (1 John 4:7-21) say that "God is love." Warn your students that the world would like to turn that around, claiming that human-generated love produces "God." Have them consider what is wrong with this concept.

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