

## “STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT LOVE” 1 John 3:11-24

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I once got myself into a standoff with a mutt that had canine bipolar disorder. (That was my diagnosis) The dog growled at me menacingly with its teeth bared, while it wagged its tail excitedly.

What do you do with such a varmint? One end said it was deliriously happy to see me; the other end warned, *one more step and you're dead meat!* Which end do you believe? Well, you'd better believe the end that can hurt you.

- That ugly growl was actually a good warning.

Deception and fraud are so rampant these days that you have to be skeptical just to survive. Nothing is quite as good as advertized. Often we don't know what to believe, so we're afraid to trust.

- That's why some people want nothing to do with any church. They say churches are full of hypocrites. Christians say they care, but they're judgmental and cruel.

I wish I could say that's nonsense. But there are some churches I'd stay away from for my spiritual health.

I've met people who visited a church looking for love and encouragement, but that's not what they found. They've had it with churches. Maybe you know someone like that.

But I believe people will give a church a chance, if they know that they will find acceptance, forgiveness, and genuine love.

- That's what makes the difference--love. Not words, but proof of authentic love.

Jesus said so, shortly before he died on the cross. *'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'* (Jn.13:34, 35)

True Christian love is the purest, strongest, and the most remarkable love you will ever find anywhere.

We looked at this theme last weekend by studying what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church.

This is a crucial issue in the church and it deserves another good hard look, this time at the Apostle John's teaching.

- It's in his letter to Christians in the Roman Province of Asia--probably in the region of Turkey today.

His words are frank and unambiguous. Over and over throughout this letter—in chapters 2 & 3 & 4 & 5—we find straight talk about loving relationships.

We'll look at what he wrote in 1 John 3:11-24. That's our Scripture text for this study.

- A church that is weak in this crucial dimension of Christian love is a bit like a car with an engine that isn't working right. It jerks along, backfiring and belching blue smoke.

When I was a teen my friend Al had a car like that. He called it his Rolls Canardly—it *'rolls down one hill and can hardly make it up the next.'*

This love that the Bible says is absolutely necessary will stall and break down if we neglect it or take it for granted.

In 1 John 3:11-24 the Apostle John shows us **three aspects of love** that demonstrate why love deserves to be the highest priority in a church's life.

### I. LOVE'S DISTINCTION (3:11-13)

Jesus said love is what sets his followers apart as distinct.

I still remember filling out my application for a British Passport when I was a teenager in South Africa. One question was: *Do you have any distinguishing marks?* I did, and I do. It's in a place that I usually don't display publicly. People might be offended. No, it's not a tattoo on my posterior. It's a scar on my tongue from the time I shoveled some lye (caustic soda) in my mouth as a little boy. I thought it was candy—what a doofus!

I should have died. It's a miracle of God's love that I didn't. So that scar is a mark of love! God's love.

If there were such a thing as a Christian Passport, how would you answer that question, *Do you have any distinguishing marks?*

Could you truthfully say it's your love?

If God's children don't relate to each other any better than those in the corrupted culture of a fallen world, then something big is broken at the core of the church.

- The Apostle John takes us back to the first two people born into the human race—Cain and Abel.

<sup>11</sup> *This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.*

<sup>12</sup> *Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous.*

When the first man and woman believed the lies of the deceiver and disobeyed God, evil entered the world and corrupted the human race.

Immediately, relationships that should have been governed by love became spoiled.

- What were Cain and Abel doing when the bitterness built to such intensity that Cain murdered Abel? The answer is in Genesis 4.

They were worshiping God!

According to John, Cain's motive for murdering his brother was envy. God rejected as evil what Cain offered, and accepted Abel's offering as righteous.

The writer in Hebrews 11:4 tells us that by faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did and that Abel was commended as a righteous man.

*'Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.'* (Mark Twain)

Cain was too proud to admit that his brother was doing the right thing and he was doing wrong. He became so angry that he butchered the person he should have loved deeply, his righteous brother.

*'When a man is wrong and won't admit it, he always gets angry.'* (Thomas Haliburton)

- So we see from earliest history that a person can be religious and also hellishly spiteful.

The account of Cain and Abel proves that God doesn't accept that kind of worship.

The signature of authentic Christianity is not church attendance. It's real love.

- Most people would agree that a godly person is someone who loves God.

Our Jewish friends regularly recite the *shema* from Deuteronomy 6:4ff. *shema yisrael, Adonai Elohenu Adonai Eghad. 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. . . Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.'*

That's primary, but it's not enough to love only God.

Some wag quipped, *I've got no problem with God; it's his ground crew I can't stand!*

God Himself added a second command, *'Do not hate your brother in your heart. . . love your neighbor as yourself.'* (Leviticus 19:17, 18)

When questioned about the most important commandments Jesus Christ tied love for people inextricably to our love for God. (Mark 12:28-31)

<sup>13</sup> *Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.*

John uses the word "world" here for the world-system as a spiritual realm that is under the control of evil. It's the direct opposite of God's righteous rule.

Cain is an example of the hatred that erupts so readily from the evil world system.

- So John said *Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.*

The surprise lies in what John implied: *'But be flabbergasted, be shocked to the nerve center of your souls if one of your brothers/sisters in your heavenly Father's family should hate you.'*

Be horrified by it! It's not supposed to happen!

It's a huge problem when some Christians change from being humbly grateful to being grumbly hateful.

- But God is rescuing people from the evil kingdom of darkness and bringing them into the kingdom of his Son, Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:13).

That's why Jesus Christ came into the world—to save spiritually-lost people, held captive in an evil world.

It's our privilege as Christ's followers to tell people the good news, and invite them to put their trust in Jesus Christ and be saved from a horrible destiny.

And what happens to the people who do this and are saved? They come into the church, the visible community where Jesus Christ reigns as Lord.

- That means Christ's church must be conspicuously different from anything people see and experience in the secular world.

The most remarkable difference is our relationships.

By our love for one another we prove to a hurting world that a fresh start—a new life—by faith in Jesus Christ is not some religious claptrap. It's real.

## II. LOVE'S DEMONSTRATION (3:14-15, 23-24)

Love is the proof of new life in Christ. That's how you know a person is a real Christian. Love demonstrates it.

A few verses before this John wrote that anyone who does not love his brother is not a child of God (v.10).

<sup>14</sup> *We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.*

<sup>15</sup> *Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.*

Christian love is the proof, or demonstration, of Christian life.

If you have passed from death to life through faith in Jesus Christ, then you know it by your love. So will others.

If there's no Christian love, there's no Christian life.

- We Bible-believing Evangelical Christians are champions of personal faith.

That's as it should be. We lead people to faith in Jesus Christ. We help them to grow strong in the truths of God's Word.

But John explains, it's not just what you *believe*. It's how you *behave*—which reflects who you *are!*

A person with a right theology can still be spiritually dead.

*'You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder.'* (James 2:19)

Love does not make you a Christian, but love is evidence that you are a Christian.

There's a song we used to sing in Sunday School when I was a little boy.

*'If you're saved and you know it say Amen. If you're saved and you know it, then your life will surely show it.'*

That last line is not a silly little ditty. It's the gritty truth.

<sup>23</sup> *And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.*

<sup>24</sup> *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.*

God gives his Spirit to everyone who believes in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul makes this clear in Romans 8:9 where he says, *And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.*

John writes in v.23 that there are two parts to God's command: first, *believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ*, second, *love one another as he commanded us*.

God joins faith and love together. What God joins together we must not separate!

Christian love is proof of Christian faith.

- It's no wonder that Jesus Christ himself made such a huge issue of his disciples loving one another!

As Jesus prepared his disciples for his departure he prayed to the Father, *'May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.'* (John. 17:23b)

Faith is the entrance to Christian life, but love is the evidence of Christian life!

Last Sunday we saw how the Apostle Paul explained to the Corinthian church that a Christian life without love is not real. It's fake!

The Apostle John explains here in v. 14: Without love there is no spiritual life because *'anyone who does not love remains in death.'*

If someone claims to be a Christian, but his/her life is marked by unloving, hostile attitudes, then that person's salvation is in serious doubt.

Folks, that's a scary truth!

Love has always been the hallmark of true Christianity. It's the evidence of genuine spiritual life.

### **III. LOVE'S DEFINITION (3:16-22)**

Jesus Christ's sacrifice is love's consummate definition.

He told his disciples, *'My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.'* (John 15:12-23)

One day there was a grassfire on our property in South Africa. When it was over my dad brought home the body of a hen that had perished in the flames. The body was stiffened with the wings slightly spread. Her nest had been in that field. When the flames came she had covered her little hatchlings to save them. She perished, but some of the chicks actually survived. The hen could easily have saved herself, but she laid down her life for her chicks.

<sup>16</sup> *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.*

This is the kind of love you should find among true Christians. It refuses to be stopped by inconvenience or hardship

The President of the United States is always surrounded by secret service agents who are prepared to die to protect him.

Can you imagine how it feels to someone who by God's grace is rescued bruised and bleeding from a hopeless fate in the hostile world and comes into a loving community of Christians, and suddenly realizes that she is surrounded by people who are willing to lay down their lives for her spiritual well-being? Wow! Please don't think Jesus' command about that kind of love is just a metaphor, not to be taken literally. There are actually hundreds of thousands of Christians who die every year as martyrs. They are willing to lay down their lives so that others may have eternal life.

Most of us are not called upon to pay that ultimate price, but the way we treat each other is supposed to prove that our love is more than words.

- Talk is cheap.

<sup>17</sup> *If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?*

<sup>18</sup> *Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*

<sup>19</sup> *This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence*

<sup>20</sup> *whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.*

<sup>21</sup> *Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God*

<sup>22</sup> *and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.*

The Apostle John said Christian love is authenticated by who you are and what you do, not by what you say.

Remember, faith is the entrance to Christian life, and love is the evidence of Christian life.

As far as people out there in the world are concerned, the most striking thing about you should be the way you love one another, and the way you welcome and respect people who haven't learned all the neat, squeaky-clean Christian practices.

- God has given us everything we need in Christ to be what he wants us to be and to do what he wants us to do?

It's not enough to be a religious, church-going person.

Cain was religious. He gave his offering to God--and he had a murderous hatred toward his brother.

Are your relationships with others in your church family as loving as God says they should be? I hope you realize how important this matter is to your own spiritual destiny and how crucial it is to the work Christ has called his church to do.

I urge you not to let another hour pass before you make things right with God first, and then with others.