

The Life of Love

By Don Green

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Truth Community Church
4183 Mt. Carmel Tobasco Road
Cincinnati, OH 45255

Website: truthcommunitychurch.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tcomm

For now we continue in 1 John 3, continuing our study of this book which teaches us how to live as Christians in the midst of a hostile world. It is possible, in fact, it is the intention of God for your Christian life that you would live with a sense of joy, living in practical holiness with an assurance of salvation that comes from a solid knowledge of Christ, of his word, and the marks of what a true believer is, and over the past few times that we have been together, we have looked at righteousness, practical holiness as being the mark, one of the marks of a true Christian. We saw that everyone who practices righteousness is born of God at the end of chapter 2, and what we've said about this and it bleeds over into our time for tonight as well is that God causes us to be born again. He comes to a sinner who is dead in trespasses and sins and he creates new life in them, he imparts new life to them; this is the ministry of the Holy Spirit in what is known as regeneration, new life, he generates new life in one who is previously dead and as he does that, he is imparting something of the divine nature. We don't become God or anything like that, but God communicates aspects of his essence to us and his life to us, and as a result of that the one who has been born again starts to manifest the characteristics of his Father. You and I bear the resemblance in one way or another to our biological parents. We reflect the traits that they passed on to us genetically and we understand that and we expect that but, my friends, do you see that when God truly gives birth to someone, someone is truly born again, they truly become a Christian, they truly have the Holy Spirit living within them, well, then the moral character of God is going to start to manifest itself in their lives and because God is holy, then true Christians are going to manifest something of holiness in their lives as well and that's what we've been looking at over probably the last three or four messages, that if you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of him.

Now that's just a little brief thumbnail review. Tonight what we have the privilege of doing is seeing how that works out in a different realm, a different aspect of the character of God and the way that it manifests itself in the lives of every true believer. God is holy and therefore we are to be holy as well, but Scripture also tells us so many other things about the great aspect of the great essence of God, and Scripture tells us in 1 John 4:7 that God is love. Well, do you know what? If God gives birth to spiritual children, if he is love as the Bible says that he is, then it's obvious that the children that he gives birth to are going to somehow be loving people. This is unavoidable. This cannot be escaped and so there's no such thing as a hateful Christian who's marked by animosity and conflict.

And let me just stop for just a moment and say something that I've tried to emphasize all the way through. We understand that there are such a thing as nominal Christians, people who in name claim the name of Christ but have never been born again, and many of us have that experience in our pre-conversion days. We understand that people profess Christ without actually possessing him, without truly being born again, and that would explain why we see so much of the professing church not manifesting the holiness and the love of God. We understand that and so what we're talking about here is the genuine article, what really happens in those who are really born again, and Scripture could not be more plain but that the God of love gives birth to children who start to emulate his love, who exemplify it, who manifest it, who love what God loves and who love the God who gave birth to them.

So the farthest thing from true Christianity is someone who is cold, indifferent, sterile in their affections toward God, their affections to other believers. Nothing could be further from the truth even though false professing Christians sometimes give true Christians a bad name by their conduct and by, you know, the way they live their lives. We're not talking about them tonight, we're seeing what the real article looks like and last time as we finished chapter 3, verses 4 through 10, we touched ever so lightly on verse 10 and it's a good transition verse from this theme of righteousness to the theme of love. It's clear that John was intending to link these two sections together and the link connects at verse 10. Look at it with me,

10 By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God [then here's the link], nor the one who does not love his brother.

And so we see that he's pivoting now to address a new section, a new topic as he continues to unfold for us the realities of Christian living.

So he's dealt with righteousness sufficiently for now in his judgment, and he goes on to now address the matter of love in the Christian life, and so what he's done here is the Apostle John has divided humanity into two classes and they don't overlap with one another. He says that those who are living righteously and those who are living lovingly, those are the ones who belong to God, everyone else belongs to the devil, and it's a very stark contrast that he makes. John writes in kind of black-and-white terms, he writes pastorally but he writes with clarity and that's one of the things that teachers of the word of God should aim for is clarity and to make the distinctions that the Bible makes so that people understand what Scripture really says. You know, it's a mistake to try to paper those things over or blur distinctions in an effort to try to make people feel good for a period of time and to salve consciences that really need to be convicted and struck with God's word. John doesn't play games with us, he just tells us the way that it is. As he writes under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he gives us a sense of clarity about where spiritual reality really is. And so what he's saying in the section that we're now approaching is that true Christians naturally have a love for other Christians. It's as simple as that. God gives birth to his children and he does so in a way that they will love

one another in addition to loving the one who saved them, and this is a distinguishing mark of true Christians is that they are known by their love for each other and that's what we're going to see as we proceed through the passage here ever so quickly here this evening.

So as we often do, we're going to break this into three sections here tonight. The first point if you're taking notes in this message titled "The Life of Love," that's the message for tonight, the life of love, the first point under that heading is this, it is the positive priority of love. The positive priority of love. Now John has earlier in the letter, he had emphasized the priority of love in chapter 2. If you'll glance back there with me in verse 9, you'll see that John had already introduced the topic of love earlier. He says in verse 9, chapter 2,

9 The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. 10 The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. 11 But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

So John has introduced this already, now here in chapter 3 he's going to circle back and expand on that earlier summary statement that he made in chapter 2 and he starts it out by this way, he reminds them of the call that they had heard from the beginning of apostolic ministry, that they were to love one another. He was saying things that they had heard in the past. Like any good teacher, John understood and practiced the importance of repetition to drive a message home. We are naturally spiritually dull. We do not get things the first time through. The fact of the matter is, is that we don't get it on the second or third or fourth time through, we need God to graciously bring the same familiar truth to us again and again and again so that it sinks deeply into our heart and starts to actually transform the way that we live. That is how God changes us, he addresses truth to our minds, Romans 12, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and perfect and acceptable." Well, here in the letter of 1 John, John repeats his themes of righteousness and truth and love, he does it repeatedly so that it would settle into our souls and transform our lives.

So looking at verse 11 here, he had just said that the children of God, the children of the devil, are obvious, righteousness, then he says nor the one who does not love his brother. Now watch what he does here in verse 11. He uses that connective word "for." For. He is bridging that last clause about loving his brother, he's bridging it to what he is now going to say and so he's expanding in this section of Scripture, he's expanding on that final clause in verse 10 that emphasized the importance of loving your brother, and so he says in verse 11,

11 For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another;

And so they had heard this call to love from the beginning, from the very time that apostolic message came to them as the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ came to them, that he loved sinners and gave himself up for them, that whoever believes in Christ would have eternal life as they repent from their sins, John says, "From the very moment that you were hearing that, from the very earliest times of your Christian beginning it was emphasized to you that true Christians love one another." And so there is this sense of commitment, there is this sense of service, there is this sense of affection that marks people that truly belong to the body of Christ. It could be no other way.

Well, John in his Gospel records multiple places where the Lord Jesus himself emphasized this to the apostolic circle before his crucifixion and I want to go back to some of those passages and just remind you of how much an emphasis this was to our Lord Jesus Christ. If you go back to the Gospel of John in chapter 13, for example, John 13 and we'll just keep our spot in 1 John, keep our finger there, in John 13:34 we see Jesus saying this, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Turn over to chapter 15, verse 12, and you'll see Jesus emphasizing this again. He says, "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." And then in verse 17 he says in the same chapter, "This I command you, that you love one another."

Now friends, Christian brothers and sisters, I want to ask you a simple question: how often does Jesus have to say something for it to be important? He only needs to say it once for it to be true and for it to be of highest importance and priority to us. Every word of God is crucial to us. There's no insignificant word of God. Jesus said in Matthew 5 that heaven and earth, actually in chapter 25, he said, "Heaven and earth will pass away but My words will not pass away." In chapter 5 he spoke about how not one jot or not one little stroke of the law would pass away until all is accomplished. He came to fulfill the law. Everything about God's word is important, that's my point, and with that said now, then how important must it be that Jesus said this repeatedly again and again and again in the same setting to his disciples and the Spirit of God found it important to record that for our edification, our study, our learning, our application throughout the course of subsequent church history? Jesus made this a great point of emphasis, the importance of love in the body of Christ, and it's not just the emphasis of that, the repetition of that that makes it important, what's stunning and what's humbling and to realize is this, is that he said that the love that we are to manifest to each other is like the love that he himself showed to us. He who came and laid down his life for us, he who gave himself, he who sacrificed himself for us, he says, "Your pattern of loving one another is found in the way that I loved you." And he loved us completely, he loved us wholly, he loved us to the point of great self-sacrifice and then in the context he said, "You love one another just like I have loved you."

Well, that sets the bar pretty high, doesn't it, to realize that that's the standard that he calls us to, and so by his repetition, by his sacrificial death on the cross, by his example we just see how this call to love one another is not something sentimental and simply about our

feelings, it is something that is lifted up to the highest life priority that is reflected in commitment and sacrifice to one another, and that's what the body of Christ is supposed to look like. It is a group, it is a gathering of people who have been saved by God, who have been born again as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit in them. Because God places his Spirit in us and his Spirit is the Spirit of love, then it is supposed to flow over and be a mark of the way that the church interacts with one another, not just in feeling but in sacrifice, in genuine care for one another and in long-term care and commitment for one another, and so this sets the bar really high and for those of us that are in Christ, it should have this effect on us, we should start to see and understand that the body of Christ, the true church, is something very very special. It is a sacred place. The body of Christ is a sacred organism, a sacred body which we come to serve, which we come careful to respect the holiness and the grandeur of Christ in forming that body for himself.

So that has the effect of when we, figuratively speaking, when we enter the doors of the church, I'm not speaking in purely physical terms here but as we think about our participation in the life of the body of Christ, we come with a sense of reverence, we come with a sense of privilege, we come with a sense of opportunity that these aren't simply other men and women that I have social interest with, this is the body of Christ. These are people for whom Christ died. Christ thought of these people in some manner on the cross as he suffered for their sins just like he suffered for mine. And so we realize that there is something precious about the body of Christ that motivates us as the Spirit of God works in our heart, the Spirit of God produces in us a sense of love, service and sacrifice that animates the way that we think about other Christians. If Christ gave his life up for his people and we belong to those people, then in some manner or another there's an aspect of us giving ourselves up for those people as well. It could be no other way, my friend, because the attitude that God has toward his children, he imparts, he replicates, he reproduces it in the lives of true Christians so that loving his people becomes an obvious marker of one who has truly been born again, and so this is just of highest significance.

So as Christ speaks about loving one another, understand he's speaking preeminently to his disciples and the way that his disciples should think and live toward one another, it refers to mutual love specifically within the church. One writer said this and I quote, he said, "Love is not feeling warm toward other people in general but doing good to specific individuals. Failure to love the family shows the lack of the family's inner bond." So in other words, if you have the love of God within you, you are going to have a bond of love that connects you to other people who have likewise been born again. God connects us through the unifying work of his Holy Spirit and it's that unifying work that is precious to Christ, precious to God as he emphasizes the importance of unity within the body of Christ again and again. We've studied that many times, I would simply refer you to the opening verses of Ephesians 4 to remind you of that and Philippians 2. You know, don't look merely after your own interests but look after the interests of others there in that chapter of Philippians 2. Over and over again Scripture talks about this and so it's obviously important to our dear Savior that we as his children would love one another and that shows us the positive priority of love and it's why John emphasizes it so much here at this section of Scripture.

Well, having set forth that positive priority, he contrasts it now with something different. That brings us to our second point this evening which we could simply say this, it's the negative picture of love. The negative picture of love. And in the verses that follow beginning in verse 12, John sets forth two negative illustrations to set the backdrop to what true love is. I've said in the past in other contexts that a jeweler will display a diamond on black velvet because the black backdrop highlights the beauty, the symmetry, the reflection of that sparkling diamond and it makes it stand out all the more by the contrast that it is resting against. Well, here having set forth the positive priority of love, John is now going to show how beautiful it is by giving it a negative picture and so he steps into verse 12 in this way, he says, "you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another," verse 12, "not as." There's the negative aspect, the negative contrast,

12 not as Cain, who was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous.

Cain killed Abel because he resented Abel's superior righteousness. He was jealous of him. Cain was a son of Adam just like his brother Abel was, but the way that he responded to his brother showed that spiritually he was a child of the devil. He was of the evil one. And because Satan has been a murderer from the beginning, Cain showed forth the aspect, the character of his spiritual father and killed his brother. And notice the connection here and this is why it's so important for us to deal with sin in our heart and not let sin fester in our attitudes, Cain's jealousy over his brother led to hatred and his hatred then led to murder. So Cain did not deal with the sin that was crouching at his door, as it says in the book of Genesis, he let that jealousy continue to fester, he did not confess his sin, he did not repent of it, and as a result of that that jealousy owned him now and it produced hatred and he acted on that hatred and he killed his brother as a result. And what that did was this, is that Cain's hostility toward his believing brother Abel set a pattern that the wicked would follow in all subsequent generations to this day and beyond.

Look at verse 13 where he says, where the Apostle John says,

13 Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you.

He says, "Look, this has been going on since the beginning of time, that the world has hated true believers." Well, if it goes all the way back to Cain and Abel, you and I should not be surprised if we meet with hostility from the world around us. Sure, we're gonna have media that is biased against us; we're gonna have family members that reject us; we're going to for some in other places and probably increasingly here in America, we're going to find that Christians lose job opportunities, they lose career opportunities as the world's hatred against us becomes more and more openly manifest. Well, what John is saying here is understand this, you know, between Cain, illustration number 1, and the world, number 2, understand this, that it's always been that way. It could be no other way.

We inherit the position of Abel, so to speak, where he was on the receiving end of his brother's hatred against him, we are on the receiving end of the spiritually demonically-inspired hatred that motivated Cain to kill Abel. Well, the world today hasn't changed in that sense, they are still demonically-inspired as we've seen throughout this letter of 1 John, they belong to the devil, the devil is their father, well, what do you and I expect then? What do we expect from the world around us except for the fact that from time to time we may experience hostility, we may experience persecution, and it may be painful and throughout the course of the history of the church, men have given their lives for the sake of the name of Christ. And it wasn't simply a theological dispute in the Reformation that cost our brothers their lives, it wasn't simply a disagreement between men, there is a spiritual hostility fueled and authored by Satan against God's children.

Well, that's the reality of it. It goes back all the way to the beginning and as a result of that, what John's point here is this, is he says, "Because that's the nature of things, my brethren," he says, "don't be surprised when it comes to you." Has someone spoken sharply to you because you're a Christian? Someone turned their back on you? Someone mocked you? Cost you maybe advancement in your work? Maybe for some of you it's cost you a marriage to love Christ and your spouse has rejected you as a result of that. Those things are really really painful. What we must understand is this, is that Scripture prepared us ahead of time to know that that was what it was going to be like. While we may suffer the consequences and feel the pain of them, my friends, it doesn't surprise us because we understand that this is the way the world system works against us. Their opposition is no mystery. They belong to the devil just like Cain did. There's a sense in which if we think it all the way through and we think of the bondage that they have to Satan and we think of what the eternal outcome is of their bondage if God does not help them and save them, we can look at that with a sense of pity, with a sense of mercy upon them and say, "Look at how lost they are. They hate the very people that pray for them, that would share Christ with them if only they would listen, that would long for their salvation. They are blindly hating the very ones that could bring the message of life to them."

So it doesn't surprise us and when we think it all the way through it actually can produce a sense of mercy toward our persecutors, towards those that resist and hate us. You know, it's very stunning to read the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7 and as he was being stoned by these men, as they were throwing the rocks upon him that would soon kill him and take his life away, he was praying to the effect, "Lord, don't hold this sin against them. Have mercy on them." That's what Jesus did on the cross, "Father, they don't know what they're doing. Forgive them." And again and again in the course of church history as you read little bits about martyr testimonies, you find this love and mercy that's being expressed from the lips of true believers in the very face of the ones who are maybe burning them at the stake. My friends, that's what God produces in us. He reproduces the kind of love that Christ showed for the ones who crucified him at the cross, and so we're not surprised by the world's hostility and it gives us something to orient our thinking when we're in the midst of opposition whether it's personal or whether it's political and the whole world environment in which we live. We should not be surprised that it's hard to be a Christian in the world in which we live, and the fact that it's hard for us is actually

kind of an indirect matter of giving us a sense of assurance that the world hates those that do not belong to it. The world hates you, the world hates me, okay then. Do you know what? That means I must be on the right side here. This must be a good thing, then, that I'm in that position and so we expect hostility, we expect personal bias, we expect media bias.

Now giving us these negative illustrations from Cain and from the world, here's the question that we want to ask, is why does John talk about that in the context of an exhortation for us to love one another? If he's talking about love, why does he immediately turn and start talking about the world's hostility against us? Why would he do that? Is that really a clear consistent train of thought? Well, it is and here's where it is so important for us to understand what he's doing here. Remember his overarching, his big point is the positive priority of love within the body of Christ, we've examined that. I don't need to repeat myself yet again on that, and now he injects this element of hostility from the world. What does that say to us? Well, what John is saying and why he gives us this negative picture is this – listen to me very carefully – if the world is going to hate us, then it is especially important for us to love one another. You and I need to be the spiritual refuge on a human level for each other, understanding that we're going to gather together, as we gather together and as we live life together as fellow Christians, we understand that we come together and we enter into the room, so to speak, I'm speaking metaphorically, as we come together, as we share life together, we understand this, we understand that we come in with some bruises that have been inflicted upon us by the hostility of the world, by the hostility of non-Christians against us. We bear some scars in our heart from the way that people have wronged us and have harmed us, you know, as a result of our testimony to Christ. That means that we view each other when we come together, we view each other with a sense of sympathy. We understand when we come together if five days from now we'll be together in the room and we'll be able to look around and consider each other in this way, but when we look at each other and we see each other's faces, there should be something in the back of our mind that says, "You know, I may not know the details but I have a true Christian brother or a true Christian sister here in front of me and I'm sure that at some point or another the hostility of the world has harmed them, it has hurt them, and therefore I want to manifest the sympathy of Christ toward them, the love of Christ toward them because I want to love them because that's what Christ did for them before, you know, long before I was ever born. If Christ loved them, I will. If the world is gonna be hostile toward them, I won't be." And the church, the congregation, the local assembly that understands this and internalizes it corporately is going to be a place where love can flourish. If the world hates us, then we must love one another because that's the only place that we're going to find it is with each other. It's with each other, beloved, that we find that. So when we come together, we come conscious of the fact that we want to come with tender hearts, setting divisive things aside and looking for ways to encourage and edify and care for one another in very practical ways. That's what Christians do with each other, we love each other. That's why unity is so important, that's why we've preached on it so very many times, is that a church divided against itself is not a place that can successfully, rightly, in a godly way love one another and so we protect that unity with zeal, we're jealous for the unity that we have with each other because we understand the priority of love and love can only flourish

where a body of believers is unified. So John's writings here are very instructive for life in the church.

So let me just say this by way of a word of application and a word of, you know, a word of exhortation, for lack of a better word for you, let me just encourage you to consider your life and to ask whether you have any broken relationships with other Christians in your life, maybe within the body of Truth Community, maybe within your family. Well, what I would just encourage you in light of this passage to consider is this, is that to the extent that it depends on you, Scripture calls us to live at peace with one another. If there are those fractures that you're aware of, beloved, I encourage you to earnestly, first of all, seek the Lord for grace, confess any sins of yours that may have contributed to that and then look for the opportunity to fix that, to repair that, to reach out and to mend that broken relationship because that's what Christians do, we love one another and we're not content to dwell in division as though that's the expected standard in the body of Christ. We love one another enough to seek to repair those broken relationships because that's what Christians do, we love each other, we love the brethren and love, John is saying, John is saying love proves that you have eternal life, its absence, its utter absence shows that you don't.

Look at verse 14 with me. He says,

14 We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death.

Now remember in chapter 5, verse 13, we said that John was wanting to produce assurance in the life of believers and so here in chapter 3, verse 14, he says, "Here's how we can know that we've passed out of death into life, it's by that mark of love in the believer's life."

Now love does not produce salvation. We don't love each other in order to earn salvation from God. No, that's the exact reverse of the proper sequence. God saves us, God puts new life in us, God delivers us from death into life and as a result of that we love the brethren and that becomes the mark to know that you have been saved. God gives you a new heart that loves his people and you can know that your heart has been changed if you love those that the world hates.

Look at verse 15,

15 Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

Hatred is the passion that leads to murder, love is a reflection of having received the life of God, and so by this negative picture of the hostility of the world, John has shown us the importance of the priority of love in the believer's life and it's a compelling picture that he gives. It gives us so much clarity and direction in understanding the world around us.

So beloved, I just close this second point by saying this, is that your life attitudes about love within the body of Christ, that's a barometer of your spiritual health. If you are cold and satisfied – pay attention to each word here – if you're cold and you're satisfied to be distant from the body of Christ, then something's seriously wrong and I just plead with you in the words of 2 Corinthians 13:5 to examine yourself; you know, to ask yourself, do you love the brethren or not, and because this is one of the marks of a true believer, that he loves other Christians and he gives himself up for them just like Jesus Christ himself did.

So that brings us to our third point for this evening: the pattern of love in Christ. The pattern of love in Christ. We saw the positive priority of love, we saw the negative picture of love, and now we see the pattern of love in Christ. What does the pattern of Christ show us? What does his life example show us? Well, the way that Christ lived and the way that Christ loved teaches us this, is that the practice of love is found in self-sacrifice for one another. It's not directed toward our feelings about one another. Those feelings come and go. You know, you get sick, you're not gonna have the same feelings for things that you do when you're feeling well. It's based on something that is more solidly grounded than that. It's a commitment of the heart that issues in life action that he's speaking about.

Look at verse 16 here where he says this,

16 We know love by this [this is what love is like, here's how we can know what love is like, he says], that He [meaning Jesus Christ] that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

What did Christ do for us? How did we enter into this life? How were we reconciled to God? We couldn't have done it on our own. We were lost in sin. We were slaves to the devil. Well, we were reconciled to God because while we were unworthy, while we were helpless, while we were enemies, Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. It's a reference obviously to the cross. He sacrificed his life to pay for our sins. He sacrificed his life to pay the ransom price that would deliver us from our slavery to sin and Satan. And that's how much he loved us, it was at the cost of his own life blood. It was a voluntary sacrifice of himself in which he offered himself up to God as the sacrifice that God required for the forgiveness of our sins. It is stunning to realize how humble Christ was, how great his sacrifice was on our behalf and to realize that he gave his soul over to eternal sufferings on the cross so that you and I could be saved, so that you and I could be reconciled, so that you and I could find our reserved place at the great banquet for the Lamb in that coming day. That's how much he loved us, he laid his own life down for us. Well, what John is saying, then, is that if that is the fountain that gave life to you, then the water that flows through your life, the water that flows through your heart is going to reflect that same willing self-sacrifice on behalf of other believers. It could be no other way. If Christ did that for all of us true believers, then all of us are somehow going to reflect that kind of same spirit of self-sacrifice for those that are within our believing

circle of Christian friends and Christian family and our local church. That's the point of it all.

So here's what I want you to see and to remember and to kind of connect the whole passage together here, this is really powerful this whole section of Scripture is: Cain hated to the point of murder, Christ loved to the point of self-sacrifice. Do you see the distinction? These are completely different outcomes resulting from completely different motivations. And so Christ loved us, Galatians 2:20, he loved me and he gave himself up for me. Ephesians 5:25, Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. Christ gave himself up for us corporately as the church, he gave himself up for us individually, he loved me and gave himself up for me, and so we see this sacrifice of Christ and what it teaches us is this, is that love gives for the sake of others. Love gives in order to serve others, to seek their well-being even ahead of its own. Isn't that what Christ did? Christ, going back to that passage that we looked at just before the virus hit, is that Christ left heaven for us. He lived a perfect life on earth for us. He went to the cross for us. He died for us, and not only died, died on a cross for us. And so you see this just continuing spirit of self-sacrifice, of humble self-abasement by our Lord so that he could secure our salvation.

Well, that has a powerful impact on the believing heart. First of all, vertically we return love and gratitude and praise, "O Christ, You did that for me while I was guilty? Thank You! I love You, I give my life to You, I submit to You, I gladly own You as my Master and I am Your willing slave, I sit in willing bonds at Your feet in response to that kind of love! Own me, use me, do with me what You will, but just find in me a heart of gratitude in response to Your self-sacrifice." Vertically we see that and then horizontally as we look at the realm of believers around us, we say, "What has God given to me? Is it my time? Is it my resources? It is my giftedness? What has God entrusted to me that I am able to lay down, that I am able to sacrifice, that I am able to use for the benefit of other believers?" That's the whole spirit of it. It can be as simple as Jesus talked about of giving a cup of cold water to one of his disciples in his name is like giving it to him. "I was sick and you visited Me. I was in prison and you came to Me," he said, all of these things being the mark of a living sacrifice of love to other believers.

Well, here in chapter 3, the Apostle John says it this way again both in a negative and in a positive way. He says in verse 17, he says this. Remember at the end of verse 16 he said we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren, and then in verse 17 he says,

17 But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?

The picture is this, it's that you have an ongoing awareness of an ongoing need in the life of another believer and something in your realm of ability could alleviate that need, but you turn your back on it, you say, "No way. That's not for me. That's not what I'm doing." John says, "Well, if that's the case, how are you reflecting the love, the self-sacrificial love of Christ toward believers if that's your response? How can you close your heart against another believer in need and claim that the love of Christ is abiding within you?"

So it's empty to talk about love unless you match it with action. So he says in verse 18, he says,

18 Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.

So talk is cheap. It's the action that proves the reality of the love. And this is not the only place where Scripture says this. If you will turn to the left in your Bibles just a few pages to the book of James 2, you'll see James making the exact same point. In James 2:14, James is using it to express the reality of faith whereas John has been using it to express the reality of love. It's the same underlying principle. James 2:14 says this, "What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?" That kind of faith, "faith" in air quotes? Verse 15, "If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself."

So what we see is this and what John has done is he's shown us the necessity of love by the reality of being born again. God imparts his loving nature to us in salvation so that the practice of love becomes a mark of one who has been born again, truly regenerated, truly having the life of God in them. That love is essential for us to practice because the world isn't going to give it to us. The world's hostile to us and so we gather together, we rally around one another on the basis of love and show forth this love. Why do we do it? It's because Christ loved us first and laid down his life for us. And so we look at the wonder of the cross and we seek to replicate the self-sacrificial love of Christ in the body in which he has placed us in, and our consideration of love is not simply empty words but it's a practical manifestation of loving one another, serving one another, helping one another, giving for one another, teaching one another. You could go on and on, there's about 20 different "one anothers" in the New Testament, praying for one another, bearing one another's burdens. It goes on and on and on. God saved you to place you in the body of Christ, my friends, and having placed you in the body of Christ there is a place for you to manifest humble service to other believers in order to manifest the love of God that has been shed abroad in your hearts.

So your love starts with those who are in your present circle of relationships, starting within your family, starting within your local church, starting with your spouse, starting perhaps with other believers in the workplace, you can go on and on. You get the point, but it starts with that present circle of relationships. You know, I live to say this, I haven't said it often enough, if you can't love the people in your own home, what makes you think that you're going to love the people in Africa if you go there as a missionary? You see, the one who's truly saved manifests naturally love without discrimination to who it is, and the home becomes a testing place for the reality of the claim, of your claim to salvation. You know, it becomes a manifestation. Your marriage, your interaction with siblings and with parents and with children, all of this becomes a manifestation of the reality of love. It's the first proving ground of these things.

So what we want to do, I say it gently, but what we want to do is avoid the hypocrisy that affirms these things in a public setting, you know, that affirms them on a Sunday morning but ignores, neglects and violates them the other six days of the week at home. Scripture doesn't countenance that kind of hypocrisy, that kind of inconsistency. The true child of God as difficult as it may be for us to live this out consistently day-to-day, the true child of God recognizes this principle of love as a governing dynamic in his life and therefore repentantly through all of his failures seeks to grow in this and to manifest it to those around him. And there's just so many ways we could illustrate that but for the sake of time we'll leave it there and trust the Holy Spirit to apply it rightly to your heart as you sort these things out.

Let's close the time tonight with this simple statement: love loves to love. If you have love, the love of God within you, then you're going to love the opportunity to love other believers within the realm of opportunity and giftedness that God has given to you. The commentator John Stott said this and just kind of brings together the contrasts that we've looked at in this passage and I quote, he says, "Hatred characterizes the world whose prototype is Cain. It originates in the devil. It issues in murder. And it is evidence of spiritual death. Love characterizes the church whose prototype is Christ. It originates in God. It issues in self-sacrifice. And it is evidence of eternal life."

My friends, does this passage convict you about your selfishness perhaps? Well, let me invite you to go to Christ, let me call you to go to Christ and to confess your sins to him and ask him to forgive you and to cleanse you and to remake you and to conform you to his image, that you would be more like the one who saved you. But don't stop simply at confession, look at your relationships and live this out practically. Surely there are practical ways that you can express the love that our gracious Lord has put into your heart when he saved you from your sins.

Let's pray together.

Father, we ask You to, indeed, help us work these things out, help us to work out our salvation as You work it out within us. We look forward, Father, to the soon return of gathering together so that we would be in a position to practice these things with one another. And Father, as we love to do, we ask You to have mercy on those who are outside the love of Christ as we speak. Father, whether they claim Christ or not, Father, You know their hearts and You know that they're still dead in sin. We ask You, Father, to show mercy to them and to help us show love faithfully to them that we might be instruments of Your grace in their lives, to the world around us, Father, that we might be effective ambassadors for Christ from now until the day You call us home. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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