

1 John 3:11-24
(Genesis 4:1-16; John 13:31-35)
“By This We Know Love”

Introduction

John continues to teach us how we can know that we are God’s children, how we can know that even now we have eternal life, and so need fear nothing in life and in death. As we have seen, the tests or vital signs of spiritual life are three: the doctrinal test: Do we believe that Jesus is everything God’s Word declares him to be? The relational test: Do we love one another as Christ has loved us? And the ethical test: Are we living in increasing obedience to God’s Word.

In this morning’s text, John returns to the relational test and illustrates the kind of love that should increasingly mark us as God’s Children.

Body

1. What is the heart of John’s message? Love one another (3:11).

John has already addressed the doctrinal heart of the message back in chapter one: “This is the message we have heard from the beginning and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all” (1:5). He followed that with an ethical implication: “If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth” (1:6).

Now, in this morning’s text, he comes to the relational heart of the gospel: “For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” (3:11). As we will see, the kind of love he is describing is not merely feelings of attraction or affection for people, although feelings are important and impact – often far too much – how we treat people. But he is talking about the settled desire to think, speak and act on behalf of one another, to build up, to help, to desire the best for one another. In order that we might be clear about what this kind of love is and what it is not, he presents us with a stark contrast.

2. What happens when we fail to love one another? We sacrifice others, and the model is Cain (3:12-15).

The Bible presents Cain as the first man born of the first parents. In order to understand the story, we need to remember its context. When Adam and Eve sinned and stood before the Lord, God told them of the consequences of their rebellion, but also promised (in the first expression of the gospel – Genesis 3:15) that a redeemer would come from the “offspring” of the woman to

destroy the devil and his work. So, when Eve bore a son, she named him Cain, which means “gotten” or “acquired,” because she said, “I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord” (Genesis 4:1). In other words, “Here he is – the promised one who will redeem us.” That she saw it this way seems quite clear, because when she had a second child, she named him Abel, which means “vanity,” or “vapor,” as when the author of Ecclesiastes wrote, “Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.” The Hebrew word he used was *abel*. To his family, Abel was superfluous. They already had the promised child, so they thought.

So Cain grew up literally believing that he was God’s gift to humanity and that his brother’s life was not of any particular importance. When God required of them both an offering, Abel brought the Lord what the Lord required, a blood sacrifice, but Cain brought what he chose to bring, some of the fruit of his farm. God accepted Abel’s offering but rejected Cain’s. Cain became enraged, filled with indignation and jealousy, and in the end, murdered his brother, Abel.

Here is the point John is making: When we do not love, we end up hating, and hatred leads to anger and to murder. Thus Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, warns that hating another is tantamount to murder, because it desires the destruction of another. Let me ask you this morning: is there anyone whom you would love to see hurt or humiliated, because you think that they have wronged you and they deserve it? You wish everyone knew what you know? If so, your soul is in peril. You are acting like Cain. John says, “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (3:15). He does not mean that murder is unpardonable if one truly repents. But he does mean that, as long as one hates another person and desire their harm, he does not have God’s Spirit in him and is still living under the curse of sin and death.

3. What happens when we love one another? We sacrifice ourselves and the model is Jesus (3:16-18).

In stark contrast, John reminds us of Jesus, who loved others, even enemies, so much that he sacrificed himself so that they might have life. John writes, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (3:16). When he speaks of loving or hating one’s brother, he does not merely mean biological family members, although they should count most of all in our love and care. He is speaking of the household of God, of our friends, our spouses, our children and neighbors, he is calling us to live and love as Jesus loved us.

He writes that when we see one another in need and have the means to meet that need, we will do it, if we have Christ’s love within us, if we are truly children of God, because that is how God’s true children act (3:17). There is a family resemblance to our Father and to Jesus, our older brother. As he has

written, God's "seed" (or "life") is in us, his Spirit is in us, and we are in Christ, so we cannot simply live the way the world lives.

He summarizes by saying, "let us not love in word or talk but in deed and truth" (3:18). We talk a lot in the church about love, but it means nothing unless our actions are loving, beginning with those closest to us. Sometimes it is easy to lavish affection and love on those we don't know well and don't have to live with, while withholding it from those closest to us. If we do that, we are not walking in the light and God's truth is not in us. So love each other in word and deed, and so love that those closest to you will rejoice that you are a child of God.

4. What should we do when we are unsure of our relationship with the Lord? The three means the Spirit uses to reassure us that we are God's children (3:19-24).

Finally, he deals with how we should respond to doubt, doubt that we are really God's children, doubt that eternal life is really at work within us. We reassure our heart in God's presence simply by applying these three tests that we are studying: Do we "keep his commandments and do what please him" (3:22)? Do we "believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he commanded us" (3:23)? For, as John writes, "Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us" (3:24).

Conclusion

How much confusion would be resolved if only Christians would learn these three tests and apply them regularly to their lives, as regularly as many of us take our vital signs. If only we were as concerned for our eternal souls as for our bodies. Cain loved himself and so sacrificed others to try to get what he wanted from God and from life. Jesus loved others and so sacrificed himself to give life to others. Which is a picture of your life this morning? Choose life, the life that only Christ can give, and that is supremely marked by love for one another. In choosing life in Christ, you are choosing eternal life and all that you've been looking and longing for all your life.

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