

## Laying Down Our Lives for One Another

1 John 3:11-18

Jerome, a Christian theologian in the 4th century, writes in his commentary on Galatians a story about John the author of 1 John. He writes that when John was extremely old, he used to be carried into the congregation in the arms of his disciples and was unable to say anything except, "Little children, love one another." Eventually, someone wearied that he always spoke the same words, asked, "Master, why do you always say this?" And John replied, "Because, it is the Lord's command, and if this only is done, it is enough" (Stott, *The Letters of John*, 146).

As we will see in our passage today, we are called to love one another. And if we will actually become disciples of Jesus who love in the way that John talks about here, in so many ways it will be enough. So much of what God calls us to would be lived out if we would love one another.

Today, we are looking at 1 John 3:11-18. In the verse right before this, John made the point that it is evident who are the children of God and who are the children of the devil. The one who is not of God does not practice righteousness nor love his brother or sister in Christ. He has spent time in the letter talking about practicing righteousness. Now, love becomes John's focus. Specifically, he is going to talk about love for each other in the body of Christ.

The central principle that John states is that we should love one another. This of course is one of the main topics in the letter.

### I. Central Principle: We should love one another (v. 11)

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

The message they heard when they first heard the gospel, which is what John still preaches, is that believers *should love one another*. This is the first of five times in 1 John that he refers to loving *one another*. It's a reciprocal expression that refers to a mutual responsibility that believers have to love each other. Obviously, Scripture has a lot to say about loving our neighbors and those who are not part of God's family, but his focus here is loving our brothers and sisters in Christ.

John had sat in the upper room when Jesus gave this teaching on the night he was arrested. In John 15:12, Jesus said:

*<sup>12</sup>My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.<sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*

Jesus taught that we are to love one another as he loved us. And the way he loved us was by going to the cross. Self-giving, sacrificial love is what Jesus called his disciples to. And it is this call to love one another of which John now reminds his readers.

Now, John goes on to give an example of not loving and of loving. First, he writes about Cain as an example of not loving.

## II. Cain: Example of Not Loving (vv. 12-15)

*<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.*

The story of Cain is found in Genesis 4 where we are told that Cain and his brother Abel both offered a sacrifice to God. Abel's was acceptable to God, but Cain's was not. As a result of this, Cain murdered his brother, which demonstrated that he was *belonged to the evil one*. And so of course we *should not be like Cain*. Cain did not love; he murdered.

Now, in verse 13, John offers a bit of an aside. He says:

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

John is referring to the unbelieving world – to those people who are opposed to God and His children. Just like Cain hated Abel because his deeds were righteous, we should not be surprised if *the world hates* us. My sense is that John makes this point to emphasize how important it is for us to love one another, because we live in a world that at times is hostile to us.

John continues:

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

*Death* is what entered the world through Adam's sin (Rom. 5:12). *Death* is what everyone has experienced because each of us has sinned (Rom. 3:23). And John says for those who do not love, they are demonstrating that they are still in the realm of death. They are not part of God's family.

Those who ARE part of God's family, however, no longer remain in death. Rather, they *have passed from death to life*. He is talking about the amazing change in status that happens to believers at the moment one places his or her faith in Jesus. We move from death to life – eternal life. And John says that the confirming proof of this change is that *we love each other*. Love proves life.

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

John circles back to the idea of hate and murder that was illustrated in Cain's life. He uses the present tense for *hates* and so he is talking about an ongoing failure to love; an ongoing wish for

harm to another. If that is what is in one's heart, that one *is a murderer*. And *no murderer has eternal life residing in him*. Such a person has not passed out of death into life.

Now, John is not saying that one who hates or even who has literally murdered could never be forgiven. Jesus himself prayed that those who were murdering him would be forgiven. Rather, what John is saying is that the one who hates does not have *eternal life residing in him*. For John there is no middle ground. Either we love or we hate.

Obviously, at times we all get mad at someone else. We get irritated, or we don't like certain people. None of us loves perfectly. This doesn't mean that we don't know God. But having said this, pay attention to what is in your heart. Is it characterized by love or by hate? If hate is what you find there, John makes the diagnosis that you abide in death. You do not have eternal life abiding in you even if week-after-week you sit here in church. The remedy is not to try to stop hating, the remedy is to come to Jesus. When one comes to faith in Jesus, you pass from the realm of death and enter into eternal life and the life of Jesus within you will begin to change you from the inside out. Jesus will begin to replace hate with love.

And so, Cain is an example of not loving. John goes on then to give the positive example, which is Christ. He is the ultimate example of loving.

### III. Christ: Example of Loving (vv. 16-18)

*<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 and sisters.*

We are called to love one another, and the model of what that love looks like is Jesus himself. Jesus' love was sacrificial - *he laid down his life for us*. And so, John says that *we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters*.

Now, the reality is that most of us will never be in a situation where we literally need to lay down our life for another believer. It could happen, and it does happen, but John goes on in the next couple of verses to apply the principle of sacrificial love in a very practical way that applies to all of us. He says:

*<sup>17</sup> If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?*

When John talks about seeing *a brother or sister in need*, he is talking about more than a passing glance. He is talking about seeing in such a way that you comprehend that there is a real need. And so, if you see that need, and if you have *material possessions* that could help, things like clothing, or food, or shelter, or whatever, and yet you don't respond, John's question is, *how can the love of God be in that person*.

A person who has love abiding in their heart will be inclined to respond very differently when they see real need. They will not close their heart to the need. Rather, they will be inclined to use their material possessions to help even if it involves sacrifice. Now, it may not be easy. A choice has to be made to express love and to meet the need. That's why John gives this final admonition:

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

John started our passage by stating his central point and that is that we have a mutual responsibility to love one another. And the ultimate example of such love is Jesus Christ who gave at great personal cost. And so, if love is our responsibility and Jesus is the model, then don't just talk about love, actually love. Love *with actions and in truth*. To love *in truth* means to love truly. John is calling us to follow the example of Christ and to love one another in practical and tangible ways even if it requires personal sacrifice.

One of the great things about being a pastor is that I sometimes have a vantage point that allows me to know how people here at Faith are loving each other in tangible ways. Here are just a few of the ways I've seen you loving one another:

- Making meals for someone after a birth or surgery or a death.
- Helping with transportation whether that is taking time to fix a person's car, or help buying a more dependable car for a person who needs it, or loaning your car, or taking people who cannot drive to doctor's appointments or to the grocery store.
- Opening up your home for someone to stay who is in crisis.
- Buying groceries for a family who needs it.
- Spending time with someone who is lonely.
- Giving to the compassion fund.

These are just some of the ways that I've seen you love one another. This is exactly what John is calling us to and it is a beautiful thing to see. But having said this, I'm sure we all know there is room to grow. I know there are some here who would say that you haven't experienced this kind of love from others in the church. And there can be a number of reasons for this, but it certainly points to the fact that we have room to grow. We all do.

If we are truly in Christ, then love is what abides in our hearts. And yet, while this is true, we still need to seek to grow in our capacity to love in practical and sacrificial ways. And so let me offer a few thoughts about how we can pursue growth in this area.

First, **meditate on Christ's example of love**. We know what love is through how Jesus loved. He is the model. He loved sacrificially. As we reflect on his example, it can help us in our efforts to love sacrificially. And so maybe your family really needs two cars, but as you ponder Christ example you figure out a way to make one car work for a time so that you can share one with someone in need. Or maybe you've saved money for something that you really do need, but you become

aware of a need of someone in the church and as you meditate on Christ's sacrificial love you decide to defer meeting your own need to give a portion of that money to help this person. These kinds of choices are hard. They involve actual sacrifice. And if we think about these things from a natural, worldly perspective, we will just think, "No, I can't do that. I need that." But as we meditate on Christ's example, that can spur us on to love in practical ways even when it involves sacrifice. And so mediated on Christ's example.

Second, **begin by taking small steps.** To love sacrificially is actually a step of faith. And if it isn't something that you've really lived out, you will need to grow into this. Begin by taking small steps of faith to love in sacrificial ways. And so maybe you've never used your money to meet someone else's needs. Find ways to begin giving something. Develop the habit of giving and let it grow into sacrificial giving that meets needs. Or maybe you rarely offer your time to help meet a need. If so, it might be hard to begin giving large chunks of your time to help meet needs. Take a small step. Offer some of your time to meet needs. I believe that as you do this, you will see that though there is real sacrifice the sacrifice is worth it. And you will find joy as you begin to love others in sacrificial, tangible ways and that will cultivate within you the capacity love in more and more sacrificial ways.

Finally, **learn to truly see.** Remember, in verse 17, John is talking about really understanding what the need is. I think part of the problem we have is that while we may have resources that we are willing to share, we are so busy and moving so fast that too often we fail to see the needs around us. One of the best ways to truly see needs is to make sure you are living in close biblical community with at least some others. If your only experience of church is worship on Sunday morning, it can be hard to see other people's needs or even to make your own needs known. We need to be in community. This is part of the reason we do Rooted and Life Groups. As we spend time with others in these contexts, we have time to get to know each other and truly see needs. When I think about many of ways that Cindy and I have loved others in practical and tangible ways over the years it has been with the people with whom we've been in a group. Being in true community with other allows you time to truly see needs.

Love one another. Meditate on the example of Christ. Begin by taking small steps. Learn to truly see. As we do these things it will help us follow the example of Christ and offer sacrificial love to one another. Love in tangible and practice ways.

In our giving liturgy today, we are using one that we often do. In this liturgy there is a line that says, "I am determined to increase in generosity until it can be said that there is no needy person among us." This part of the liturgy is talking about each of us determining to grow in our own generosity such that we are meeting the needs of each other in the body of Christ. Of course, God calls us to meet needs in the world. But this line in the liturgy is about meeting the needs of our brothers and sisters in the church. What a beautiful picture God is calling us to. What a testimony it will be to the world around us if we will truly love in this way. May we love in such tangible and practical ways that there truly is no needy person among us.