

**“THE ESSENCE OF LOVE”**

Throughout this sermon series, we have been saying that the overall theme of this letter is ‘the tests of true Christianity.’ John gives us three tests that we should use to examine the genuineness of our profession of faith in Jesus Christ: the test of obedience, the test of love, and the test of sound doctrine. In our last two sermons, we considered John’s further elaboration of the test of obedience, where he made it clear that those who have truly been born again will practice righteousness and will not make a practice of sinning. In our text today, where John gives a further elaboration of the test of love, he tells us that Christians are assured of the genuineness of their faith when they give of themselves in sacrificial ways to meet the needs of those around them.

One of the things that stands out in this passage is the fact that John speaks in such black and white terms here: you either love people or you hate them; you have either passed from death into life or you are still abiding in death. This is consistent with the way John talked about obedience in the previous section, where he said that you are either practicing righteousness or making a practice of sinning, either a child of God or a child of the devil. For John, there is no middle ground. However, as we said last week, John is not denying the fact that Christians still sin. Christians still wrestle with the sin of hate. Christians fail to love others as they should. The reason why John states matters in such black and white terms here is because he wants to underscore the fact that if we have truly been born of God, a dramatic change has taken place in our hearts. We really are new creatures, even though the old nature remains present alongside the new nature.

John is saying that, because we are new creatures, we will live a new kind of life, a life that stands in sharp contrast to the life that is lived by those who have not been born again. This means there is an element of challenge in these verses. If we really are who we say we are, then our lives should exhibit the kind of love that John describes here.

The call to love one another is so basic to the Christian gospel that John is able to say that it is a message that we have heard from the beginning. Love is the fundamental Christian virtue, the foremost of the fruits of the Spirit. In fact, love is so foundational to biblical religion that Jesus even said that the entire law hangs on two basic commandments: the commandment to love God with all of your being and the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. It is not hard to understand why love is so central to the Christian faith. After all, the gospel is the good news of God's love for the world, as Jesus famously said in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." And if the gospel is about God's love for us, then it makes perfect sense that the recipients of this love would respond to the gospel by exhibiting love in their own lives.

Set in sharp contrast to the life of love is the life of murderous hatred, a life that is exemplified in the very first murderer in history: Cain. Cain murdered his brother Abel because Abel's deeds were righteous and his deeds were wicked. It was a crime that was fueled by jealousy. And for this reason, Cain stands as the prototype for the world in its hatred of Christians. We should not be surprised that the world hates us when we strive

to be faithful to Christ. The world's antagonism to Christ is revealed in its opposition to the church.

In verse 14, John says that our love for others, and especially our love for other Christians, is evidence of the new birth. Note, however, what John does not say. He does not say that love is the cause of spiritual life. Rather, it is the evidence of the new life. When something is alive, we expect to see signs of life. We expect to see a ten-month-old child doing things like crawling all over the place, getting into everything, and screeching at the top of his lungs. Those are all good signs, signs of life. Well, John is telling us that love is the Christian's preeminent sign of life. Christian conversion is the passing out of death into a state of spiritual life in Christ. And love is the foremost fruit that the Holy Spirit produces in the lives of God's children. Those who have truly been made alive in Christ will bear the fruit of love.

In the next verse, verse 15, we come to another example of John's black-and-white way of thinking. He says that if you do not love your brother, you hate him. And if you hate your brother, you are a murderer. Now, it might seem like this is overstating things. And of course, there is a sense in which it is an overstatement. Hatred is not the same thing as murder, at least not in the eyes of the civil authorities. You will go to prison, and perhaps even be put to death, if you murder someone, but you are not going to be charged with any crime if you bear ill will toward someone in your heart. John's words in verse 15 do not mean that there is no distinction at all between murder and hatred. The point that he is making is simply that both of these sins flow out of the same heart attitude.

They are different outward expressions of the same inward attitude. Hatred is essentially wishing that the other person was not there, or wishing that something bad would happen to him. For this reason, it is of the same species of sin as murder.

I think most people know, at least at some level, that it is wrong to hate other people. If you were brought up by parents like mine, one thing that was impressed upon you was that the words 'I hate you' were never to come out of your mouth. Hate is a strong word, and for this reason we probably do not think of ourselves as being guilty of hating others very often. But the fact of the matter is that we are tempted to hate other people all of the time. When people do or say things that hurt us or irritate us, when they hold views that are contrary to our views, when they fail to live up to our expectations, at such moments we are tempted to respond with hateful thoughts, hateful speech, or hateful actions. And we are experts at justifying the hatred that we direct towards others. We rationalize that we are entitled to feel the way that we do about this person. We have all done it. Well, John is telling us that we must not do this. We should be mortified when we see hatred in our hearts. Hatred is evidence of our old nature. It is certainly not a sign of the new life that we have in Christ. And for this reason, it is something against which we need to fight with all of our strength.

In verse 16, John tells us that our love for one another is to be patterned after Christ's love for us. He 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." Jesus showed us what love is. In Christ we see that the essence of love is self-giving. It is setting aside your interests in order to

meet the needs of others. Love is not primarily a feeling. It is an action. It is about serving others and doing them good. Love seeks to meet other people's needs. It is important to realize this, because it is easy for us to think that we love people when we are not actually doing anything to care for the particular people around us. One commentator puts it this way: "Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular." [cited in Stott, 147]

The call to love one another is especially challenging to us because we are living in a culture in which our lives are so insulated from the lives of others. The example that John provides in verse 17, where a person sees his brother in need and has the means to meet that need but fails to do so, presupposes that the person was at least able to see his brother's needs. But this is not always the case for us. We do not always know about the needs of the people around us. There may not be very many poor people in our congregation, but this does not mean that there are not real needs, needs that we have the ability to meet. Part of loving one another involves getting to know each other well enough that we have an awareness of the needs that are present in our congregation. Only then will we be able to exhibit genuine self-giving love towards one another.

What does self-giving love look like? For one thing, it is a love that is willing to be inconvenienced for the sake of others. It is a colossal understatement, but Jesus was certainly inconvenienced for the sake of our salvation. He set aside the glory that he had as the eternal Son of God and humbled himself, becoming a man. He shared in all of our limitations, hardships, sadness, pain, and temptations. And then he allowed himself to be

subjected to the painful, shameful, and cursed death of the cross. Here is a good rule of thumb: if you are not inconveniencing yourself for others, you are not loving people in the way that Christ loved us.

Another characteristic of self-giving love is that when we wrong others, or when we fail to love them as we should, we go to them, admit our failures, and ask for their forgiveness. This is really just another way in which self-giving love is so inconvenient for us. No one likes to admit that he is wrong.

Another aspect of self-giving love is that it is willing to suffer loss for the sake of our fellowship with other believers. The apostle Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 6, where he tells Christians that they are not to take one another to court. He writes: "To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?" [v. 7] Self-giving love is love that is willing to pay a costly price to preserve unity with other believers. It is a love that is willing to forgo its rights.

God has saved you so that you might lay down your life in love for others. Paul says that "we are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." [Eph. 2:10] And elsewhere he tells us that "[Christ] gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works." [Tit. 2:14] Christians are to be people who are zealous to do good to others. Consider this

description of Christians by the second century philosopher and Christian apologist

Aristides, in a work that he addressed to the Roman emperor:

“They love one another; the widow’s needs are not ignored, and they rescue the orphan from the person who does him violence. He who has gives to him who has not, ungrudgingly and without boasting. When the Christians find a stranger, they bring him to their homes and rejoice over him as a true brother. They do not call brothers those who are bound by blood ties alone, but those who are brethren after the Spirit and in God. When one of the poor passes away from the world, each provides for his burial according to his ability. If they hear of any of their number who are imprisoned or oppressed for the name of the Messiah, they all provide for his needs, and if it is possible to redeem him, they set him free. If they find poverty in their midst, and they do not have spare food, they fast two or three days in order that the needy might be supplied with the necessities.” [cited in Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 504-5]

Of course, this is not to say that all second century Christians lived lives of perfect love, but there is plenty of evidence from the Bible and other literature that tells us that the early church was especially known for its self-giving love. And love has been the distinguishing characteristic of the church throughout its history. It is important for us to be reminded of this, especially as we live in an age when people tend to focus only upon

the ugly side of church history. It is certainly true that there have been plenty of dark moments in church history and that there have been plenty of professing Christians who have done awful things. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that we can also cite example after example of famous Christians whose lives were characterized by their sacrificial service to others. And there are countless other Christians who have lived lives of self-giving love in relative anonymity. Love, as Francis Schaeffer once said, truly is the mark of the Christian.

If we take an honest look at ourselves, though, we will inevitably see that we fail to love others as we should. We are very selfish, far more selfish than we could ever know. How should we respond to this? Certainly not by falling into despair. For that would only be another act of selfishness on our part. As Francis Schaeffer puts it,

“If we fail in our love toward all Christians, we must not tear our heart out as though it were proof that we are lost. No one except Christ Himself has ever lived and not failed. If success in love toward our brothers in Christ were to be the standard of whether or not a man is a Christian, then there would be no Christians, because all men have failed.” [*Works*, vol. 4, 188]

No, the way for the Christian to respond to his failures is not to despair of his salvation. Rather, it is to repent and look to the Lord for forgiveness, to give thanks for God's great patience and mercy, and to determine, trusting in the Lord to give us strength, to do

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better. So let us do this, brothers and sisters. Let us repent of our failures in love, and let us strive to excel in loving one another in sacrificial ways, even as our most kind and loving Savior has loved us.