

## JESUS CHRIST LAID DOWN HIS LIFE FOR US

1 John 3:11-24

Key Verse: 3:16

“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.”

In the last passage we learned the characteristics of the children of God and the children of the devil. Children of the devil cannot by nature do what is right or love others. Children of God, who are born of God, can by nature do what is right and love brothers and sisters. Love is the essence of Christian fellowship. Though we may have strong faith that can move mountains, if there is no love, we are like a resounding gong which just makes a lot of noise (1Co 13:1). Christians should have faith, hope, and love always. Among these, the greatest is love. What is love? How can we know it? How can we practice it? How can we have assurance that we belong to the truth? Let us learn in today's passage.

First, love one another; don't be like Cain (11-15). Verse 11 says, “For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.” This message had been publicly proclaimed from the beginning. It had been repeated so frequently that everyone knew it; it was not “secret knowledge.” Jesus had first introduced this to his disciples as a new command at the Last Supper just before his arrest (Jn 13:34). John, who had been saturated by Jesus' life-changing words, kept repeating this--whenever he opened his mouth. When we hear these words, we may feel very burdened by them, realizing that we do not love, and may even hate others.

After encouraging us to love one another, John also tells us what not to do and introduces Cain, the prototype of hatred. Verse 12 says, “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.” It is shocking that John chose such an extreme example as Cain murdering his brother Abel. Brothers can fight with each other frequently

because they are brothers. But their intention is not to harm each other, and they hardly ever kill their brother. If they do, it is usually an accident. But Cain's case was different. It was not an accident. The word "murder" means to "slaughter, kill by violence, slay." Cain intentionally and willfully murdered his brother. Why? When his offering was not accepted by God, he should have repented. Rather, he took offense and became rebellious against God. Then jealousy arose in his heart and he could not control himself. In a rage, he murdered his brother as an act of rebellion against God. In fact, he belonged to the evil one.

In using the example of Cain, John helps his readers understand the world's hatred against the children of God. Cain is the prototype of enemies of God in the unbelieving world. In light of his story, we should not be surprised when the world hates us. Sometimes we wish the world would be a little more appreciative of those who do good. Instead, the world reacts with such criticism and hatred that we are surprised. Why does the world hate us? It is because we do not belong to the world. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (Jn 15:18-19). No one wants to be hated by their classmates, fellow employees, neighbors, or family members. In order to avoid being hated, we are tempted to compromise. If we do, we lose our clear identity as God's children and our ability to influence the world. Instead, we become like the world. John wants us to realize that we cannot be respected and loved by the world when we live as children of God. We need to decide to bear the world's hatred in order to love and serve God. Then we can influence the world like Daniel's three friends: Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego. Though they were thrown into a hot, fiery furnace, they did not compromise with idol worship. They said, "The God we serve is able to deliver us...But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Dan 3:17-18).

Though we may not be recognized by the world, and even hated by the world, the blessing we receive from God is so great that we do not need to have any sense of loss. In verses 14-15 John makes a great contrast between

those who love and those who hate: “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.” Loving each other is not the condition of salvation, but the fruit of salvation. When we see this fruit being born in our lives, we can have assurance that we have passed from death to life. There are two realms: the realm of life and the realm of death. The realm of death is ruled by the devil, while the realm of life is ruled by the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The realm of death is characterized by hatred, murder, lies, jealousy, slander, and the like. The realm of life is characterized by love, joy, peace, truth, grace, righteousness, holiness, and justice. These two realms are mutually exclusive. No one belongs to both and everyone belongs to one of them. That is why John says that no murderer has eternal life in him.

In recent days, we have seen the realm of death manifest in the city of Chicago through rampant lawlessness, including organized attacks on police officers and violent murders. As a result, many innocent people have been killed or severely injured. What should we do? We should pray that law and order may be restored. We should pray for murderers and opportunists to be punished, and for justice to be restored--especially for those who have suffered injustice. Most of all, we should pray for a spiritual revival which restores God’s reign of life in people’s hearts so that they may cross over from death to life.

We were all born into the realm of death, destined for eternal condemnation in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. How can we pass from this terrible realm to the wonderful realm of life? Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life” (Jn 5:24). This is an amazing promise. When we just hear and believe Jesus’ word we cross over from death to life. The devil can no longer claim us as his own. Our new ruler is Jesus Christ, who paid the full price for our sins. This is the gospel. We should share this gospel with the people of our city. Anyone who hears and believes the gospel receives new birth through the work of the Holy Spirit. As we have experienced, when we are born again, suddenly everything becomes beautiful and lovely. Even those who once looked like enemies, suddenly look like dear

friends. It is because we passed from the kingdom of hatred to the kingdom of love. We can genuinely love others, even enemies. As we do so, we gain assurance that we are in the realm of life and have eternal life. Let us love one another and not be like Cain.

Second, this is how we know what love is (16-18). While Cain is the prototype of hatred, Jesus Christ is the prototype of love. Though John has emphasized love in his letter, it is easy for people to misunderstand what he means. There are so many ideas, songs, and movies about love. People are fascinated with the word "love." In the mid 1970's there were many pop songs about love in the USA. Finally, a famous band released, "Silly Love Songs," which both parodied this phenomenon and justified the continuance of producing such songs. The implication was that such love songs are fun and make people feel good, but they lack the true substance of abiding love.

What does John mean by love? In this part he tells us what love truly is. Verse 16 says, "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." The Greek word translated "love" is "agape," which is God's love. This love is self-giving and self-sacrificing. We did not know this love until Jesus Christ came into the world and laid down his life for us. Before knowing this love, our concept of love was limited to what comes from the natural world. To the Greeks, this could be categorized with different words for love. "Eros" refers to the love or affection we feel for something attractive or beneficial like a delicious meal from McDonalds ("I'm lovin' it"), a new car, or a gorgeous person. "Phileo" refers to the love between brothers or friends, such as the camaraderie that soldiers feel in battle or that nurses feel in working together to save lives. "Storge" meant the love a parent has for their children, which can be quite profound and deep. But "agape" is something which transcends all of these. This is the love God initiated when he sent his one and only Son Jesus as a ransom for us. This love saved us from the power of sin and death. This love motivates us to love others. This love takes the initiative to reach out to others first. This love embraces one who needs help. This love sacrifices for the sake of others. This love seeks to build up others for their good, especially for the salvation of their soul. We ought to love our brothers and sisters in Christ with this love.

The word “ought” is a very strong word like the word “must” which Jesus used in Mark 8:34: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus loved us first. Jesus set the example for us and enables us to love as he loved. Once we have received his love, practicing it is a Christian obligation. It is not a suggestion but an absolute imperative for his followers; it is a command to be obeyed. The words “lay down our lives” mean that there is no restriction on this love. It is a willingness to surrender what is valuable to us in order to enrich the life of another. Many people say, “I love everybody.” Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular. In verse 17 John tells us how to practice love specifically: “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?” The love of God has compassion toward those in need. If anyone sees a brother or sister in need, but has no compassion, they do not have the love of God in their hearts. Truthfully, ignoring others in need can be more cruel and hurtful than hating them. We call this indifference. In his warning about the last days, Jesus said that because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most would grow cold (Mt 24:12). We should pray to overcome cold indifference and love one another wholeheartedly. When the love of God is in our hearts, compassion will flow toward those in need. Recently, the members of our Christian community made generous offerings of money, food, time, and prayers to serve those in need. Thank God and let us continue to do so.

We might think that we must be rich in order to help others. But this is not true. Though we are not rich, we can still practice love when we have God’s love in our hearts. We can pray for and comfort others. For example, once Leo Tolstoy was walking on the street. A beggar stretched out his arms to him for help. Tolstoy tried to help the beggar but could find nothing for him, not even a penny. So he held the beggar’s hand and said, “Brother, I am so sorry. I don’t have any money to give you.” Then the beggar smiled at him and said, “I have already received a valuable thing from you--more precious than money. You called me ‘Brother.’ I felt the warmth of love from your hands. I value these more than money. Thank you.” Tolstoy saw that his eyes were

filled with tears.<sup>1</sup> Love is not a matter of possessions, but of heart. Even if a person has great wealth, without love, it is impossible to love others. But when a person has love, he can share this love with his brothers and sisters even if he does not have money. In conclusion, John said, “Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (18).

Third, this is how we know that we belong to the truth (19-24). After hearing John’s clear command to love, we may wonder if we are genuine Christians. None of us practice Jesus’ love for others perfectly all the time. We have moments when we fail to love others--neglecting them in time of need, lashing out at them with our words, failing to minister to them as fellow members of the body. Knowing that we are all in this predicament, John includes important words of encouragement in verses 19-24. As we struggle to practice God’s love, let us remember we are not made righteous by our works, but by faith in Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

In verse 19, John said, “This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence.” By loving others with actions and in truth, we gain assurance that we belong to the truth, and we have confidence when we stand before God. Sometimes we feel that our hearts are good, and it seems that everything is okay. But when our hearts are troubled it seems that nothing is okay. Sometimes our hearts condemn us because we feel our own inadequacy and failure to love others. Then Satan accuses us. We suffer from condemnation and guilt, blaming ourselves for lack of love and indifference. In such times, we need to come to God. Verse 20 says, “If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” Our heart condition is not the standard for acceptance by God. God accepts people solely by his grace. God knows everything--every motive, action and thought. He knows our sincere struggle and our weaknesses. We are afraid to let our weaknesses be known because people exploit them for their own benefit. But God never does. Though God knows everything about us, he loves us with self-sacrificing, unconditional, unchanging love. Knowing this puts our hearts at rest; we have fellowship with God, confident of his love.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theologyofwork.org/the-high-calling/audio/tolstoy-and-beggar>

<sup>2</sup> Swindoll, Charles R., *Living Insights: 1,2,3 John & Jude* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2018), p. 93-94 (kindle).

If our hearts do not condemn us, we can have confidence before God (21). We receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him (22). We have a great privilege to ask God freely for whatever we need in prayer. But our prayer should be according to God's will (5:14). When we keep his commands and please him, our prayers will be answered. His command is to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ and to love one another as he commanded us (23). When we keep his command, we will live in him and he in us (24a). We know this by the Spirit he gave us (24b). The Holy Spirit living within us testifies with our spirits that we belong to the truth. The Holy Spirit inspires us with conviction.

In this passage we have seen the contrast between hatred and love. Hatred characterizes the world; its prototype is Cain. It originates in the devil, brings forth murder, and is evidence of death. Love characterizes the Christian community; its prototype is Christ. It originates in God, produces self-sacrifice, and is evidence of eternal life.<sup>3</sup> This love was planted like a seed in our hearts when we were born again. We need to nurture this seed of love and help it to grow by putting God's love into practice. The more we practice God's love, the more we grow in depth and width and height in his love. Moreover, as we practice God's love, he gives us deep assurance that we belong to the truth and have eternal life. Let us remember what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. Let us practice God's love.

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<sup>3</sup> Stott, John R. W., *The Letters of John* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 146.