THIS IS HOW WE KNOW WHAT LOVE IS

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.”

As we have been learning in 1 John, fellowship with God and with one another is at the core of real Christianity. In today’s passage the author delves into one of the greatest enemies of this fellowship—broken relationships with our brothers and sisters. The passage also shows us the great healer and reviver of fellowship—the command of our Lord Jesus to love one another. Jesus didn’t just give the command to love; he showed through his own example how to do it. As we think about today’s verses we want to learn several things. We want to learn what it really means to “hate” a brother or sister, and how and why that might happen. We want to learn what it really takes to obey the command to love. And most of all, we want to meditate on what it really means that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us, and how we can practice that kind of love in our real-life relationships. May God bless each of us through his word today.

As we’ve seen, the Apostle John has been writing to a Christian community where certain people recently left. These people had been a part of the community but were there no longer. And it seems as we read this letter that they had left on bad terms. One of the major problems was that they thought they knew better than everybody else. But John knew a deeper problem—they had superficial, broken relationships with their fellow Christians. John already pointed out in chapter 2 the most important command of Jesus for his true followers to obey: the command to love (2:7–10). And at the very end of last week’s passage, John mentioned that one of the telltale signs of truly being born of God is the capacity to love (3:10). Now John begins to delve more deeply into this issue of love and hatred among those who seem to be believers.

Let’s read verse 11. Here, “from the beginning” could be interpreted in many ways, but mainly it seems to be since our Lord Jesus himself was on earth. After Judas Iscariot left to betray him, Jesus told his disciples, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn13:34,35). There are many things Christians think they should be doing. They think they should be going to church, living moral lives, offering money, praying. But mainly, Jesus commanded us to love one another. Apostle Paul wrote that knowledge puffs up while love builds up (1Co8:1). Paul wrote that even if we can speak in tongues, have the gift of prophecy and a faith that can move mountains, even if we give away all our possessions and suffer all kinds of hardships, if we don’t have love, we are “nothing” (1Co13:1–3). Loving relationships, not only in our families, not only with friends, with people we like, but with fellow believers, should be at the core of who we are. But unfortunately that's not often the case. Many people seem to be strong in the “knowledge department” but weak in the “love department.” What’s worse, many believers have broken, even hostile relationships with each other. Some believers get so mad at each other that they don’t even want to see each other or sit in the same room with each other.

The Apostle John knew that we all have this tendency, and so he reminds us of the bad example of Cain. Let’s read verse 12. Cain showed that he didn’t belong to God but to the devil when he murdered his own brother. He hated his brother so much that he murdered him. It seems extreme. But our Lord Jesus taught the same thing, that even being angry with a brother or sister is in the same category as murder (Mt5:21,22). John wants us especially to remember Cain’s motive. Some people seem to be angry with others for some righteous reason. But rarely is *our* anger truly righteous. Cain got so angry with his brother Abel simply because Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did (Ge4:3–5; Heb11:4). Abel’s beautiful, wholehearted offering to honor God exposed Cain’s own offering as superficial and self-centered. Whenever we get exposed as wrong, the right thing to do is to humbly admit whatever is wrong and quickly repent. But too often, what happens is that we start justifying ourselves, and then, blaming others. We especially start resenting people who seem better than us. This develops into jealousy, hatred, broken relationships and sometimes even worse things. When we see a fellow believer serving God with all their hearts, instead of getting angry or jealous, we should be loving that person even more! And we certainly shouldn’t pull back from loving God wholeheartedly just because we’re afraid of offending people. Let’s read verse 13. Even though we’re just trying to truly love God and truly love others, we should expect to be hated, not because we’re bad, but because all people have a sinful nature like Cain.

Let’s read verses 14,15. Here John again writes about how to know who is who. Those who love have passed from death to life—they’ve actually been changed by Jesus. In fact, they have eternal life. But those who don’t love are still remaining in the deadness of their sins. Many of us would like to be neutral, in a place where we don’t know and we just don’t care. But John repeatedly writes in stark terms: it’s either black or white, truth or lies, light or darkness, good or evil, love or hatred, life-giving or murder. The language is meant to jar us out of our complacency. Someone once wrote, “Indifference is the worst form of hatred.” Real Christianity forces us to start relating to the people around us and to confront the issues within us that hinder us from loving them. If we’re really following Jesus, indifference isn’t an option. Finally, we learn here who to trust: we can trust the people we can tell have learned how to love.

This leads John to consider one of the most profound questions in life: What is love? If we should love one another, what *is* that love? Let’s read verse 16. Our Lord Jesus himself defined love by what he did. He set the standard for love, and he set the bar pretty high. He laid down his life for us. He said in John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Though we acted like his enemies Jesus treated us like his best friends and laid down his life for us. It’s something that sometimes gets us emotional just thinking about it.

But it’s not just for us to enjoy. John says in light of it, we ought to lay down our lives for our Christian brothers and sisters. So, what kind of love is that? It’s not a feeling. It’s not a philosophy or theory to analyze. We know that Jesus loves us because he laid down his life for us (Ro5:8). It was a love rooted in fact, not theory, a love in action. And it’s not a business-kind-of-love, where we're trying to get a return on our investment. Basically, it’s a self-sacrificing-kind-of-love. It may seem that we wouldn’t have to do it very often—actually sacrifice our lives for others—maybe in a crisis. But actually, Jesus’ love isn’t a “crisis love”—it’s a “way of life love.” It’s a love that always puts others ahead of myself. It’s not a love that leaves us guessing, unsure if it’s real. We know what love is in what Jesus *did*. It’s obvious—anyone can see it, even a child. And anyone can see if his love is actually real in us—it’s obvious. Jesus said, “Everyone will know that you are my disciples, *if you love one another*.” [emphasis added]

People who exhibit this kind of love get noticed by those around them, and their lives are heart-moving. There’s a couple; one is a teacher; the other is a coach. They’ve been so busy pouring their lives into helping all their students in and out of the classroom that they had no time to care for their own yard at their house. It was so bad that their own four children couldn’t play outside, and their neighbors nominated them to have a yard makeover, not just because it was so ugly but because they were so deserving—they were living with an obviously unselfish love. The neighbors said, “That’s the kind of people they are.” They could tell by their self-sacrificing actions.

Another important thing to note here is that, as followers of Jesus, we’re commanded to love not just helpless, needy, victimized, pitiful people, but “one another," “our brothers and sisters” in Christ. Galatians 6:10 says, “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” But historically, co-working among Christians has been so hard, ridden with so many difficulties that sometimes it can seem impossible. Why is it so hard? In light of this passage, basically it’s because we’re not really following Jesus’ example of love. Especially the leaders in a ministry should care so deeply about each other that they’re actively serving one another in selfless, self-sacrificing love. People doing that are the ones we can trust.

To emphasis how practical this love is, John gives us a very specific illustration. Let’s read verses 17–18. One of the biggest enemies of fellowship and of love isn’t hurt feelings, but selfishness and indifference. When our hearts are stolen by pursuing or holding onto material possessions, our love for others and the authenticity of our fellowship shrivel up. That’s why our Lord Jesus taught us, “You cannot serve both God and money” (Mt6:24; Lk16:13). Throughout our lives as Christians we have to make a choice: Will concerns about money and possessions dominate my heart and life, or will concerns about people dominate my heart and life? This is not just about sharing possessions. Are we actually aware of others? Do we notice what others are going through? Do we care? When we see others' problems or needs, do we actually do anything to help them? Or do we make our lives "all about me"? As we all know, in the real world many people say with words that they love, but their actions say something else. The same reality applies to Christians: can people see by our actions that our love is true? Or can they see that we’re basically living for ourselves?

Now let’s read verses 19,20. Self-righteous people can’t understand these verses. But John writes this to those humble believers who know how inadequate their love really is, how indifferent and mean they’ve been to those they should have been loving. He doesn’t want them to fall into self-condemnation for their failures. Instead, he encourages them and us to live before God. He reminds us that God knows everything. It means God knows all about us, our sins, failures and shortcomings, and yet he loved us so much through giving us his Son. God knows way better than any “know-it-all” who we really are. So we shouldn’t judge ourselves, and we shouldn’t let other people’s criticisms or judgments affect us, either. In God’s loving presence, our hearts find true rest, and, confidence. In his loving presence, we can really pray.

Let’s read verses 21,22. What stands out here is the conditions for having our prayers answered. It reminds us of Jesus himself. Jesus had confidence in his Father’s love for him. Because of his love relationship with his Father God, he always kept his Father’s commands and did what pleased him (Jn8:29). He always sought to do God’s will, not his own, and when anyone lives the way Jesus did, God listens to their prayers (Jn4:34; 6:38; 9:31; 1Jn5:14). But what does it really mean to “please” God? The Bible says that without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb11:6). But this faith, like love, needs to be expressed in obedience, in action. Let’s read verses 22,23 together. If we keep these two commands, we please God: believe in Jesus, and love one another as he commanded us. If we miss doing these things, we’re not pleasing God, no matter how many other rigorous religious things we may be doing.

To continue assuring true believers, John says something more. Read verse 24. Here John uses the word “keeps,” the same word he used in verse 22. It means to attend to carefully, or guard. As we keep God’s commands, we live in God, and God continues to live in us. It implies that when we break his commands, we break this fellowship. The clear sign that God lives in us is the presence of his Spirit within us. It’s his Spirit that enables us to love the way Jesus did (Ro5:5; Gal5:22).

May God help us to repent of any kind of hatred we may be harboring toward any Christian brother or sister, and of our indifference. May God help us to obey the command to love one another, and grant us his Spirit to do so. May God especially help us keep on practicing the love of Jesus, who laid down his own life for us.