

Introduction

What makes the church distinctly Christian? What is it about us that makes us different from the rest of the world? Is it our morality? Is our distinctiveness to be found in the fact that we do certain good things and avoid certain bad things? I don't think so. There are many people in this world who, apart from Christ, live seemingly very moral lives. There are many people who live within a traditional Christian understanding of morality—whose lives would align quite nicely with many of the Ten Commandments and with the God-given sense of right and wrong that every single person created in his image possesses within them. If I may be so bold, I might even say that there are many Muslims, Mormons, Jews, and Atheists who far exceed many Christians in the church today in the doing of good things and the avoiding of bad things.

If not our morality, then what? What makes us different as those who, as John says, *“have passed out of death into life?”* Is it because we believe in a God? Clearly not; there are many people in this world who believe in a God, and many who even hold to a monotheistic view of God like we do. Is it because we gather regularly to worship our God? Well, no, there are many people in the world who do that too. What then? What makes us—Christians—distinctly Christian? What particular attribute marks us, sets us apart, as followers of Jesus Christ?

As it turns out, Jesus himself had something to say about this question. In the days leading up to his death, as he sat with his disciples for his Last Supper, Jesus spoke to them and gave them a commandment that would go on to define them as his people. John records Jesus' words in his gospel account, in John 13, beginning in verse 34, Jesus says, *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

It is our love for one another, Jesus says, that distinguishes us from the world around us. It is our love for one another that clearly communicates, more than anything else, that we belong to him. This is the teaching of our great Saviour, and it is the reason why John begins our passage this morning speaking about a message that his hearers had heard from the beginning. These beloved Christians, who John tenderly addresses as *little children*, have known about this message from the very first day they heard the gospel. As the apostles had gone out and were faithfully obeying the Great Commission, teaching new believers to obey all that Jesus commanded them, this command of Jesus—that Christians ought to love one another—would have been one of the most foundational commandments of them all. This command is what John says his readers had been taught from the beginning of their Christian life. And here, in the midst of all of their trials, difficulties, and discouragements, John seeks to remind them that they already have everything they need. They don't need any shiny, fancy, new teachings. They don't need the latest and greatest spiritual trends. As they were being assaulted by false teachers and being abandoned by those who were rejecting Jesus and rejecting them together with him, John knew that his readers needed to be encouraged to stay the course—to remain grounded in the truths that they had from the beginning and to not stray away from them.

And so, this is where John begins in verse 11 of our passage this morning. He speaks to these beloved Christians and tells them of *“the message that you have heard from the beginning.”* And so, my first point is quite simple. I want us first to **Hear the Message**.

Hear the Message (vv. 11–15)

John writes, beginning in verse 11, *“For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.”* Right off the bat, we notice that John begins this verse with a small but mighty word—*‘for.’* Functionally speaking, the word *‘for’* could just as easily be substituted with the word *‘therefore,’* which leads us to the well-known and often-quoted adage that helps us be better interpreters of Scripture. For the adults in the room, this remains great advice for each and every one of us, but for all the children in the room this morning, listen up, because this one is really great for you too! It goes like this—*“Whenever you see the word therefore, make sure you know what it’s there for!”* this word always points us back to something that came before and invites us to draw connections between what was said then and what is being said now.

In our case, the connection isn’t particularly complicated or difficult to understand. Cast your eyes with me up one verse—past the subheading—to the end of the last section in verse 10. Here, John wrote, *“By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.”* Back in our previous sermon, John ended by making a point—that whoever does not love his brother is not of God. In many ways, you could understand our passage this morning to be a further unpacking of what he said in verse 10.

The message that they have heard from the beginning is exactly what Jesus said in John 13:34–35, that they should love one another. In the next verse, John does something very interesting. In what is the only Old Testament reference in this entire letter, John contrasts Jesus’ command to love with an example from all the way back in the book of Genesis, to the story of Cain and Abel, the first two sons of the first two humans, Adam and Eve. He writes, *“We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous.”*

Seems simple enough, doesn’t it? In perhaps one of the greatest understatements in all of Scripture, John tells us that if we are called to love one another, we should definitely not be like Cain. It doesn’t take a bible scholar to recognize that Cain is a really bad example of brotherly love, and if we are looking for good role models for how we should love each other in the Church, Cain is certainly not the guy we want to be looking up to. His hatred for his brother was so great, in fact, that it didn’t stop at being merely hatred. His hatred grew so strong that—in the language of James—it conceived and gave birth to murder. Cain killed his brother Abel after God accepted his brother’s sacrifice and rejected his own, which is a story that we can find in Genesis 4, all the way back in the beginning of the Bible.

Here is a place, children, where we can learn a really important lesson about the Bible. If you have a Bible with you, I want you to pick it up and take a look at it. Right now we are all the way at the back of the Bible, and there’s only a tiny little bit left until we get to the end. In this passage, John is talking about Genesis 4, and if you wanted to try turn there, you’ll see that we have to go all the way back to the front, so far, in fact, that we’re pretty much all the way back at the beginning. This is a great example of how the entire Bible is connected. All of it matters, and all of it fits together perfectly, like a puzzle. We spent some time on Wednesday nights memorizing 2 Timothy 3:16, so many of you children know that it says that *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,”* and here we see a Bible author living out that truth. John clearly thinks that the entire Bible is so important that he will jump all the way back to the beginning, to the book of Genesis, to illustrate his points. For John, the Old Testament is not stuffy, old, or irrelevant. It is the inspired word of God.

Moving on, after telling us directly that we should not be like Cain, John asks the question that may be on somebody's mind, "*And why did he murder him?*" Why did Cain murder his brother? Yes, we can see from Genesis 4 that it was because God accepted his brother's sacrifice and rejected his, but John lets us know that there is actually more to it than that. He immediately answers his own question, "*Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous.*"

Here John is holding up Cain as being the establisher of a pattern. He says that Cain hated Abel because Abel's deeds were righteous and Cain's were evil. We know from the book of Hebrews that at least part of this comes down to the fact that Abel offered his sacrifice in faith while Cain did not. And in this, Cain became the first example—the prototype, in the words of commentator John Stott—of the world that remains in the control of the evil one and which hates those who are righteous.

You may have felt like verse 13 seems a little out of place in this passage. Here, John says, "*Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.*" In a passage about the importance of loving one another in the church, it may seem strange that John would interject this comment at this point. However, if you keep the context of the letter in mind, it begins to make more sense. Remember, these Christians were being abandoned by those who were leaving the church, rejecting Jesus, and leaving them feeling rejected and alone as a result. Those who had deserted them had obviously not displayed the kind of love that John is saying characterizes genuine Christians. Quite the opposite, in fact. These deserters—these false teachers—were actually proving themselves to be of the world, of those who follow in the footsteps of their ancestor Cain, and who are ultimately, as Jesus would say in another place about the Pharisees, "*of their father the Devil,*" even as Cain himself is here said to be "*of the evil one.*" John here is giving his readers a word of comfort. Because they are righteous—because they already are obeying the commandment which they had from the beginning, and because they are living upright and holy lives, they shouldn't be surprised to find that the world would hate them and would persecute them.

Cain represents the world which is under the control of the devil, and it is a world that hates the righteous. It was true in Jesus' day, it was true in John's day, and it is true in our day as well. This is the same kind of jealous hatred that led the religious leaders of Jesus' day to cry out for his execution, it is the same jealous hatred that put him on the cross, and as his children, we shouldn't be surprised that, when we live righteously, the world will not accept us. In some instances, and increasingly so in our world today, it may even hate us. The great commentator Matthew Henry said it very well (and also quite poetically) in his wonderful old-fashioned style. He said, "*The serpentine nature still continues in the world. The great serpent himself reigns as the God of this world. Wonder not then that the serpentine world hates and hisses at you who belong to that seed of the woman that is to bruise the serpent's head.*"

John continues on in verses 14–15 to speak—as he often does throughout this letter—of how the free grace of God in Jesus Christ leads to obedient living. In his typical fashion, John begins with a positive statement and then emphasizes his point further by following it up with a negative counterexample. He writes, beginning in verse 14, "*We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.*"

The message they had heard from the beginning is that they "*should love one another.*" Therefore, he says that they can know for certain that they have passed out of death and into life by their love. This is, in many ways, a restatement of John's arguments from previous chapters in this letter. In Chapter 2, verses 9–11, John said, "*Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever*

hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”

Of particular note here, I think, is verse 15. When John says that “*everyone who hates his brother is a murderer,*” he is clearly in alignment with—and perhaps even referencing—the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. There, Jesus teaches that obedience to the law of God isn’t merely about outward conformity in your behaviour, but is actually a matter of the heart. In Matthew 5, verses 21–22, Jesus says, “*You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment. ’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.*” John is very clearly falling in line with Jesus’ teaching that hatred in one’s heart is no different in the eyes of God than murder itself, so he therefore says, “*whoever hates his brother is a murderer.*”

Now, this is not to say that we love our brothers and sisters in the church perfectly, nor does it mean that we don’t find ourselves at times feeling angry, frustrated, or sometimes even unforgiving toward those whom John is calling us here in this passage to love. No, in fact, we are imperfect, sinful people who wrestle daily with the reality of indwelling sin that still exists within our flesh and wages war against our souls. We do not—and will not—love our brothers and sisters perfectly. However, as we thought about in our previous sermon, John is here speaking to the ongoing realities that characterize our lives over the long term. The question is not, “have you ever gotten angry with a brother and sister?” But rather, “what is the heart posture that characterizes your life at a high level and over time?” John is not saying that if you’ve ever been angry with someone in the church at any point that you do not have eternal life abiding in you. What he *is* saying, however, is that if anger, frustration, hatred, and a lack of love are the most normative, dominating heart postures of your life within your church, that is clear evidence that God’s transforming work of regeneration has not taken root in your heart, because our love for brothers and sisters is one of the primary outflows of our salvation—one which makes God’s work in us externally evident for everyone, including ourselves, to see. “*We know that we have passed out of death into life,*” John tells us, “*because we love the brothers.*”

This is the message that all of us have heard from the beginning—that we should love one another. This is the message that John wanted to use to encourage his readers in the midst of difficult trials. But our love for one another, I think you’ll agree, does not carry a great deal of meaning apart from the love that serves as its source. That is why, after reminding his hearers about the message they have heard from the beginning, John reminds them of where their love comes from and how it is ultimately empowered. First, I wanted us to **Hear the Message**. Next, I want us to **Behold the Love of Jesus**.

Behold the Love of Jesus (v. 16)

In verse 16, we arrive at what I believe to be the key, most crucial, verse of this entire passage. Without verse 16, nothing that John says before and nothing that comes after has any real meaning. This verse is the cornerstone—the linchpin—and in it 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.*”

How is it that we can know how to love one another? How can we even know what love is in the first place? We know love, John says, when we see the great love of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for us. “*I am the good shepherd,*” Jesus said in John 10:11, and “*the good shepherd*

lays down his life for the sheep.” A few verses later, he says, *“For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”* At the very core of Jesus’ redeeming work is a wonderful, unimaginable, self-sacrificing love for his sheep.

Jesus’ love drove him to the cross, where he—the perfect, spotless sacrifice—paid for all the sins of all who would believe in him by faith. His sacrifice was acceptable to God because he was perfectly righteous—he obeyed God’s law perfectly in every moment of his life. He earned his standing before God through perfect obedience, and as the only man in all of history who has been undeserving of judgement, he bore the unlimited, eternal wrath of God against sin. *“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree,”* Peter says, *“that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”*

But Jesus doesn’t simply pay the penalty for his people’s sins and leave them with merely a blank slate. That wouldn’t be enough, because if you want to be accepted by God and enter into his eternal kingdom, not being sinful isn’t enough. Not only do you need to not be sinful, you also need to be actively and perfectly righteous. And as the perfectly righteous One, Jesus gives us his perfect righteousness as a gift. When we are united to him by faith, we are clothed in his perfection even as our filthiness and imperfection is removed from us as far as the East is from the West. And as a result, we are saved from the judgement that we have all rightly earned by our sinful nature and our sinful conduct, and we instead carry the hope of an eternity with our God in a place where all his promises will be fulfilled once and for all time.

And we know that Jesus accomplished these things because in his resurrection, God was declaring that Jesus’ sacrifice was both fully acceptable and actually fully accepted for each and every sin committed by his people in the past, present, and future. This is the message of the gospel—the good news which we hold dear and which we proclaim. And so, if you are in Christ this morning, **Behold the Love of Jesus.** Be reminded of the truth that in him, your sins are forgiven. Your actual, individual sins—each and every one of them in their full number—that you have ever committed, and the ones you have yet to commit in the future, have been fully and completely paid for by Jesus on the cross. If you have trusted in him alone for your salvation, then you will stand before God clothed in the perfect robes of his righteousness, and it will be as if you never sinned, as if you never failed to obey any one of his commandments perfectly, and you will be brought into your eternal hope fully and completely based on what Jesus has done for you, and not even in the smallest way based on anything—good or bad—that you have done.

Why did Jesus do this? He did this because he *loves* you. Yes, I am speaking to you all generally as the church, but I am also speaking to each and every one of you as individuals. If you have trusted in Jesus, then he went to the cross *for you*. He took *your* sins to the cross. He took *your* name to the cross. And remember, Jesus was not forced to do this. He wasn’t coerced into dying for your sins. Remember what he said—*“I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”* Jesus laid down his life for you because he *loves* you.

What an amazing love! What a wonderful example of how we ought to love our brothers and sisters in the church. And yet, at the same time, brothers and sisters, is it not also so much more than just an example for us? Jesus didn’t die for us merely to set a good example for us to follow. No, his love actually *empowers* us and gives us the ability to love one another as we are united to him by faith. He is the vine and we are the branches. We would not have the ability to love like Jesus if he did not give us that ability by the power of the Holy Spirit whom he and his Father sent to be with us. Beholding the love of Christ isn’t just about seeing it, understanding it, and trying to copy it. No, Scripture tells

us that as we behold his love, we are actually changed. We are transformed; we are given the Spirit-empowered ability to love as we behold and abide in the great love that he has shown to us in his perfect life, sacrificial death, and vindicating resurrection. Remember, John's message is that we should love one another—but this is why verse 16 is so important, because the call isn't to love one another in our own strength. Rather, it is to love one another in *his* strength. "*We love,*" John will say later in this very letter, "*because he first loved us.*" And what should be the result of that love in our own lives? Well, John tells us—"we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers."

And so first, **Hear the Message**. Remember what you have heard from the beginning—that we should love one another. But second, rather than press on to love in your own meager strength, **Behold the Love of Christ**. See what great love he has shown to you, and by beholding him, be empowered through your union with him to love because he first loved you. Rest in all that he has accomplished on your behalf and rely on him to give you the strength you need to love your fellow believers well. Finally, with our last point, let us now turn to some practical application—**Love Each Other Sacrificially**.

Love Each Other Sacrificially (vv. 17–18)

In verses 17–18, John writes, "*But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*" In some ways, this isn't exactly the sort of exhortation that we might have expected at this point. John just got finished saying that we should lay down our lives for each other, but then immediately shifts gears to focus on something far less radical and something, frankly, far more ordinary.

In technical terms, what we have here is an argument from the greater to the lesser. The idea goes like this—"If we ought to lay down our lives for one another, then surely it is *also* true that we should meet one another's physical needs." If the greater thing is true, then the lesser thing must also be true. In this case, John seems to recognize that most of us will not actually find ourselves in the position of laying down our lives for each other in the most literal sense. That *is* something that we ought to be willing to do, but realistically, not many of us will face that particular circumstances any time in our lives. Does that then mean that we can't be obedient to the command of this passage to love one another? Certainly not! John here makes a profound connection between the ultimate self-sacrifice of giving one's life with the ordinary, everyday kind of self-sacrifice that comes from making sure that our brothers and sisters have a roof over their heads, food in their stomachs, shirts on their backs, and shoes on their feet. In some ways, this call from the apostle John is remarkably simple, down-to-earth, and uncomplicated.

Make sure you pay attention, though, to what John is *not* saying here, and pay attention to the words that he has been using throughout this passage. He has been speaking about loving *one another*. He speaks of *love for the brothers* and of someone seeing *his brother* in need. Recognize that John here isn't calling us to love all people in the world equally. It is certainly true that, in a more general sense, God does call us to love our neighbour as ourselves, but here (and in many other places in Scripture), we see a particular call to love *within the church* toward fellow believers. The apostle Paul would say it like this at the end of the book of Galatians—"So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."

This is also a call to love *sacrificially*. That is to say, that our love should reflect the love of our Saviour. John is clear that in his love we know love, and his love was one that put the needs of others above his own needs, and one that was willing to make even the ultimate sacrifice for the good of those whom he loved. We could define Christlike love as self-sacrifice for the benefit of someone else, and nowhere is this more clearly seen than in Philippians 2, verse 3–8, where Paul writes, “*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*” In the words of commentator C.H. Dodd, “*Love is the willingness to surrender that which has value for our own life, to enrich the life of another.*”

One last thing I want us to pay attention to—notice that in this passage we see a switch from talking about *the brothers* in the plural to a person seeing *his brother*, singular. John Stott again gives a very helpful and uncomfortably piercing comment on this passage, and one that I trust will cut pretty deep into each one of our hearts this morning. He wrote, “*The transition from the plural (our brothers) to the singular (his brother) is deliberate and significant. It is easier to be enthusiastic about Humanity with a capital “H” than it is to love individual men and women, especially those who are uninteresting, exasperating, depraved, or otherwise unattractive.*”

As Christians, we have a particular calling to love each other and make sure that every need within our midst is met. John speaks of a scenario in which we see a brother or sister in need and in which we have the thing that they need. If we are truly those who have been transformed by beholding the love of Jesus for us, what ought to be our natural response? I trust that every single Christian in this room would gladly give what they have in order to make sure that another Christian has their needs met! If you had plenty of food, you would be more than willing to share some with a brother or sister who is hungry. Likewise if you had plenty of clothing and someone in the church didn’t have enough, I know that you would be willing to give the shirt off your backs for that person.

John isn’t actually calling us to anything particularly radical or sensational here. He isn’t calling you to sell everything you have and give it all away. No, in fact, he is speaking to those who already *have the world’s goods*, therefore he speaks of giving out of one’s own abundance, not even going out of your way to find the needs, but simply when a need is staring you directly in the face. Children, sharing what you have isn’t something you should do just because your mom and dad tell you that you should—it’s something that God says that each and every one of us should be doing no matter how old we get, especially within the church.

This is the natural response of anyone who has been transformed by the wonderful message of the gospel. This is true enough that John then argues for it in the reverse. “*But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?*” Put another way, how could someone have truly grasped Christ’s amazing love for them and internalized it and been transformed and empowered by it if they are willing to actively ignore the needs of their brothers and sisters right in front of their noses and instead keep everything they have for themselves? John therefore ends this passage with a final exhortation, summing up everything he has taught in the previous seven verses—“*Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*” Put in more simple terms—let us not just say we love each other, let us actually *show* our love in tangible ways. This final verse sounds to me a lot like what James says in James 2, verses

14–16—*“If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”*

And do you know what I think? I think this church has proven itself time and time again to be filled with this kind of generous, heartfelt, sacrificial love. Over the course of many years, I have seen the saints of CBC Ilderton display the love of Jesus in their care for one another in more ways than I could even count. My family and I in particular have been the recipient of so much wonderful generosity in our own times of need, and I know that many of you sitting here this morning can recount many similar stories. In this, brothers and sisters, be encouraged, because this kind of love is how you know that you have been redeemed—saved from judgement, given an eternal hope, and brought from death to life. And as you are loving one another, continue to do so all the more. Continue to look for opportunities to care for one another and meet each others needs, to sacrifice something of your own comfort and ease to help a brother or sister in need.

Conclusion

Hear the Message, that we are to love one another. **Behold the Love of Jesus** who shows you what love is and empowers you to love like he loves, and then go and **Love One Another Sacrificially**. This love is what distinguishes us from the rest of the world and indelibly marks us as those who belong to Jesus. And as you love one another, be confident that the words of our great Saviour are true—that by so doing, the world will know that we are his disciples. Let's pray.