

Love one another

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[0:00] Now, perhaps you can turn with me in your Bibles once again to 1 John 3, still on page 1227. And we're going to read the section that begins at verse 11 down to verse 20, where we read this.

For this is the message you heard from the beginning. We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belong to the evil one, and murdered his brother.

And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brothers were righteous. Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.

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.

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.

[1:11] 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?

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech, but with actions and in truth. This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence.

If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Amen. Amen. So we're continuing to think about the church as the house that Jesus builds.

We're thinking about what does it look like as the life of God is at work in the life of the church. And so we come to this section, which is all about loving one another. So to help us to get into it, let's think about markers of identity and belonging.

So I guess it's a familiar sight. Tomorrow morning, if you happen to be out around quarter to nine, I guess, or half past eight, you will see some school kids in uniform, no doubt, and you will know, okay, they belong to that school.

[2:23] Or we see supporters in their team colors, and we understand where their sense of belonging lies. And we're also familiar, I think, with the idea that within certain groups, there is a particular feel and a particular set of values.

If you join a new student society, or if you're involved in local party politics or some interest group, even if you're in the terraces at a football match, there are shared ways of talking and acting.

So groups have a look and groups have a feel. And John is telling us that's to be true of God's church also. So as we think about the house that Jesus builds, we thought about that a couple of weeks ago, as we think about the church as the body of Christ, we were thinking about that last week, what does that look like and what does it feel like?

And John says it looks and feels like love, love one another. In this section of his letter, he's reminding us that as we've been joined together by God's love for us in Jesus, as God's love is poured out into our hearts, of necessity, God's love is then flowing out from us to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And the impression that that is to create is that someone on the outside looking in might say, see how they love one another. There is a particular quality of Christian love that is in view.

[3:57] But I wonder as we come to think about that, do we sense perhaps the challenge of it, or even our own need perhaps to confess our failures in this regard? You know, as the church and as individuals, we don't always live up to the truths that we profess.

The church should be the most welcoming and loving environment that any person could ever find themselves in. But sadly, we know that that's not always the case.

Churches do not always serve to give life. Churches and Christians can, in fact, repel people rather than attract people. If you've ever heard, you know, Christians being labeled for being hypocrites. Or, you know, the problem, so many of the problems of hate and division in the world, where they stem from a religion and they stem from the church. Maybe you know stories.

Maybe you've had the story where a church has been a source of hurt rather than healing. There is a point where, as Christians and as churches, we need to confess that we don't always live up to the truths that we long to live up to.

[5:11] That the church can turn people off from Jesus, and that's a terrible truth and a terrible reality. I imagine for us, if we are Christians, we want to be consistent.

We want to practice what we preach. We want this to be what our church families are like, places of love and sacrifice and service. But it can be challenging.

So this evening, what we're going to do is we're going to spend some time together just thinking about this key mark of the Christian church. So we're going to hear the command, and it's there in verse 11. Jesus calls us to love one another.

We're going to think about the cross because we're told that Jesus' death reveals what God's love for us looks like. And then we're going to see the confident assurance that we can have, that love for one another gives us assurance of our salvation.

So let's begin looking at the command. So we'll think about the whole section, verse 11 to 15, but especially verse 11 there. This is the message you heard from the beginning. We should love one another.

[6:22] Just to introduce John's letter. This is a defense of true faith from false faith, true Christianity from false. And so he sets up a number of different tests.

And one of those we could call the social test. Do we love one another? And we understand that this section is all about that test.

Because one bookend, one side, 311, we should love one another. And then if you go to 421, the end of the section, and he has given us this command, anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

And everything in between really focuses on this issue of God calling us to love one another. Within the wide section, it's got that key statement, and we heard it twice as Neil read it for us, that God is love.

It's said in 1 John 4, 8 and verse 16 also. So the God who is eternal, it dwells in eternal love.

[7:24] That love is essential to God's character and nature. God is love. God is holy love. And as he describes God as love, he then says that that should have a knock-on effect for the children of God.

If the God of love is our Father, if we were to take a spiritual DNA test, then as Christians we should see that love is essential to who we are.

That we have a new love towards God, and we're called to love our neighbor, but there is a special love that we are called to have for our brothers and our sisters within the Christian fellowship.

We should, chapter 3, verse 11, love one another. In verse 14 of chapter 3, he changes the image slightly. We know that we have passed from death to life because we love each other.

So if you imagine you're in a hospital ward and you see lots of banks of monitors, there are lots of ways to show signs of life. You know, those things that go up and down.

[8:39] This is, for the Christian, a sign of spiritual life. Are we loving one another? That a sign of life of God in us is that love from God for his children will be worked out in us.

Again, just to go back to 311, when John says, this is a message you heard from the beginning, he's reminding us that this is part of core Christianity.

This is essential. This is not something that was added at a later date. This has always been Jesus' design for how his church is to function. And that's why we read that little section of John 13.

And to recognize that the Jesus who told us to love one another is the Jesus who perfectly practiced what he preached. And so just to remind us when this is happening, Jesus is speaking at the time of the Passover, which will become the Lord's Supper.

And just before saying those words, Jesus has laid aside his outer robe, and he's got down on his knees, and he'd washed his disciples' feet. So Jesus, who practices humility and service and practical love, he is the one who says, go and do likewise.

[10:04] And he will show us the fullest extent of his love as he will go to the cross, and we'll think about that. But like lungs breathing in and then breathing out, we receive God's love as it's poured into our hearts, and then it flows out from us to one another, or it should.

There is a warning that John has in these verses. Notice 12 and 13, and then verse 15, do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother.

He uses this negative example as a warning. So Cain, back in Genesis 4, brother of Abel, the story records that terrible sequence that begins with jealousy, that leads to hatred, and that climaxes with murder.

And in the midst of that, Cain hardens his heart to God's warning. So remember the point where God doesn't accept his sacrifice because his heart is wrong, and Abel's is right, and he's really angry about that.

And God comes to him and says, have you got any right to be angry? And then he says, remember, sin is like a predator crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must master it.

[11:19] But he hardens his heart to God's warning. And so hate is what defines Cain and Cain's response to righteous Abel. And so what John does is he uses that example of here is how Cain acted towards his righteous brother Abel to say, this is how the world typically acts towards the church.

So notice what he says in verse 13. Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. So there's this pattern of, because they're opposites, and like darkness and light cannot co-exist.

There is the sense that the world is angered and wants nothing to do with the light, Jesus and his people. And so there is a pattern here within the world that stands as a warning, do not be like the world in terms of showing hate and disregard towards God's people, God's family.

And so one thing that he's doing actually in these verses is saying, well, here's one way to diagnose our spiritual condition. How do we feel about the people of God?

Signs of love are signs of spiritual life. But when John says to us, this is the message you heard from the beginning, we should love one another, we recognize that he is echoing Jesus' words, and we understand that Jesus is calling his church to be a genuine counterculture marked by true love.

[12:58] And let's just think about what a difference that makes when a local church, when a group of God's people live that way. What difference would it make? Here's one way it would make a difference.

We would find a church to be a refuge from the usual rat race that we are so familiar with. You know, that sense where we're always feeling like we're comparing our CV or our achievements or our gifts with someone else or they're doing it to us.

How easy it can be to be competing for prominence and importance in society. The church has to be so different because we serve one another.

And we can serve one another because we've got a secure identity, because we know God's love for us in Christ. And so we are free within the church to say, you first, not me first, to value others above ourselves, as we find in Philippians.

A church that loves this way, I think is also a safe haven in what's often known as the selfie generation. In what sense? Think about this.

[14:13] If we've got love for Christ in our hearts and in this community, then the one thing that we shouldn't be doing is building our own personal platforms. We shouldn't be making it all about ourselves because who are we called to boast in?

Not in ourselves, but in Jesus. And when we're living applying the gospel of grace, we don't have to apply the airbrush filter to our lives to give the impression that we are doing just fine and we're achieving wonderful things.

Rather, we have freedom to confess sin and failure and need. So when a church really lives practicing God's love together, it creates a very different community.

And it serves to put a spotlight on the glory of God's love towards us and towards the world. When we build a life around this value, God's love for us in Jesus, when we work that out together, by God's design, we shine a light in the darkness.

It made me think, some of you were there actually. I can't remember how many winters it was ago, but the Cozzi project, they had an art project and from our building, in the midst of winter, they projected a light show.

[15:42] So imagine how dark and cold a typical Edinburgh winter is. And then there is light beaming from this place. And that's exactly what John is saying and Jesus said, the church is to be the people of God shining the love of God into a dark world to draw people towards the light of God's love.

So that's the command. Jesus calls us to love one another. And then he gets more particular. Let's look secondly at the cross because there at the cross, Jesus reveals God's love to us.

Verse 16, this is how we know what love is. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. So the love that Jesus teaches, the love that John is speaking about, is a love that Jesus has put on display.

And it is a love that is, when we think about applying it ourselves, is more demanding and difficult than may at first seem because what we discover is this is a love without any limits.

I was thinking about Matthew 5, 46. In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives a reminder to his listeners, if you love those who love you, what reward will you get?

[17:07] Are not even the tax collectors doing that? So when we think about the kind of love that Jesus is calling his church to, it's not the easy bits and it's not just with easy people.

It's not just a love for those who are like us and those who happen to like us. Rather, and this is where it becomes really important, I think, in a fractured world where we can often focus on differences that divide us, Christian love and the Christian church should stand out as a place of healing because we understand the nature of love because we've seen it and we've experienced it in God's love for us in Jesus.

So that it is Christians who are uniquely equipped to love even when it is inconvenient, to love at great personal cost, to show love across the barriers of our own personal comfort, across our own personal cultures.

The more we appreciate God's love for us and the more we move closer to the source of true love, who is God, we find that we are moving closer to one another as brothers and sisters and the better able we are to put this love on display in the world.

So what exactly does God's love look like? And that's why he gives us chapter 3, verse 16. This is how we know what love is. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

[18:41] And then again in chapter 4 and verse 9, this is how God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him. This is love.

Not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Love looks like laying down.

And John deliberately uses the same language that he used in his gospel. So in the middle of the Lord's Supper, Jesus laid aside his outer robe so that he could wash his disciples' feet.

He says that same Jesus laid down his life to wash us clean of sin. That he laid down his life to give us eternal life.

He demonstrates God's love so we can experience God's love. But we understand that that love is sacrifice. Jesus in love takes our place.

[19:51] When we think about Jesus dying on the cross in that place of curse and punishment, we understand that that should be our cross, our cross, our curse, our punishment.

That there on the cross, as Jesus becomes the atoning sacrifice, he faces and absorbs God's wrath, the wrath that should fall on us.

Jesus fell on it for us. When Jesus dies and the world goes black and he cries out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

That should be our experience eternally. Separation from God and his goodness. But Jesus lays down his life for us.

Jesus takes death for us. Jesus gives everything for us. He is wounded for our healing. He is condemned for our freedom.

[20:55] He is forsaken for our welcome. And as we think about God's love for us in Jesus, we also understand that it is positive and it is active.

The God who describes himself in the Old Testament as compassionate and merciful and gracious, he sees our need. And Jesus comes to act, to meet our need.

When we think about the story of the good Samaritan, Jesus is the great Samaritan who recovers and restores us to life and health, paying the ultimate price in order to do so.

So love is sacrificial and costly and active. This week, I was reading an article from a Christian counselor. And the counselor was reflecting actually on Philippians 2.

The bit at the beginning, do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit rather than humility, value others above yourself. And then it moves on to have the same mindset as Christ. Towards the end of the article, told a lovely story of a married couple, an old married couple called Bobby and Kathy Keaton.

[22:05] And they'd been married for 68 years and were still very much in love until the very end. And the counselor was recalling a time when Bobby was 93 years old, I think, in a memory care facility.

So Alzheimer's was taking hold. Only had a few weeks left to live. And his wife, Kathy, came to visit this particular afternoon. And the staff said that as soon as Bobby saw his wife, his face is lit up and he tried to run down the corridor to reach his precious wife.

Well, a couple of months after that, this counselor asked Kathy, what was the secret of their healthy marriage?

And she said, I learned that all I had to focus on was looking out for Bobby because I knew he was looking out for me.

And I think that statement wonderfully reflects the gospel. It wonderfully reflects Jesus' mindset for us. The sacrifice of Christ towards his bride, the church.

[23:15] And what John does, as he includes that, this is how we know what love is in the middle of this section. He's saying, we need to be transformed and fueled by the love of God for us in Christ if we are to love one another.

And so the cross reveals God's love to us. And then let's think thirdly about this because it's so important. He goes on to speak about confident assurance.

He says that as we love one another, it stands as a mark of our salvation. This whole letter is designed to give assurance to Christians.

We know this because John tells us that. 1 John 5, verse 13. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

So he's writing that they may know with confidence that they might have assurance of faith. And so he's saying to them, when you have love for Jesus Christ, when you know that he's the Son of God and when you know that he is the sacrificial Savior, and when you are practicing love for his people, then that is a mark of belonging to God.

[24:34] It's a sign of the life of God working itself into the life of God's church and into God's people. John, by the time he's writing this letter, is an older Christian.

He's a wise pastor. And one thing that he knows is he knows people's hearts. He knows our hearts. So look with me at 1 John 3, verse 19, when he says, this is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence.

If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything.

So he understands that as Christians, there are times when we face doubts.

And how do we answer those doubts? How might we silence those whispers in an appropriate way? And one answer that he's giving to us in this letter is to help us to ask the question, well, do I have a love for Jesus and his church?

Is that love present in my life? Is it continuing in my life? Notice he doesn't say, is it perfect? But is it genuine? Is it there? It's a message that John keeps on repeating.

[25:54] Chapter 4, verse 7. Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

There's assurance. Chapter 4, verse 12. If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

And again, verse 16. Whoever lives in love, lives in God and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment.

In this world, we are like Jesus. If we can see signs that we love the church, like Jesus loves the church, we can have confidence for now and for the day of judgment.

And to instruct us and to encourage us, John writes to remind us and to help us to think about, well, what does that kind of love look like? So back to verse 16.

[27:01] 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 our sisters. So the kind of love that we are to practice is sacrificial and servant-hearted.

We believe Jesus is our savior and we also know that Jesus is our example. He is how we are to love. And when we begin to think about that, then every Christian that we meet who is in need, it becomes a way for our obedience and love for God to be put to the test.

It's a way for us to practice faith as we seek to love those that we find in need. And so he says in verse 17, 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?

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech, but with actions and in truth. So we should be willing to let love touch our bank accounts and our diaries.

It should influence our stewardship of time and resources and our energy. We can be really thankful.

[28:17] I'm really thankful in this church for the many examples that we have of people demonstrating practical love within our church family, caring for new mums, caring for the elderly, caring for those going through serious illness, those facing loss.

We can give thanks for those models that we see. And what we find from John in this letter is reminding us that love is positive and love is active, just like Jesus' love was positive and active. John is saying the same thing as James will say in his letter, James chapter 2, actions speak louder than words. And so there in verse 17, he gives us a really simple formula.

If you see a brother or sister in need, and if we have the ability to meet that need, then we ought to act in love. It's demanding, but it's not complicated.

It's like the parable of the good Samaritan. Jesus condemns the two who see the need and cross the street and walk on by. And he calls us to be a good neighbor and to practice love without any limits, not to be trying to limit it like the guy talking to Jesus.

[29:33] Jesus, who is my neighbor? Give me the nice easy list that I can practice. He says, go be a neighbor to anyone who's in need. And so here we find John saying that as we are fueled and empowered by God's grace and love, as we're following the example of love set by Jesus, we are to practice love for one another, to make visible and evident that we belong to him.

So when we put this together, we recognize that by God's design, this church and every local church is to be a place that is marked by, characterized by love for one another.

That it's part of our gospel instinct. We understand that God has loved me, though I am unworthy and unlovely. And God has loved them.

They are now my brothers and sisters. And so I will love them too. It prompts us to ask the gospel question within a local church, not asking in the first place, who is serving me and who is meeting my needs?

But rather we're looking out, who will I love and serve to put God's love on display? And it reminds us of the importance of being a gospel community, that part of our mission is God's people sharing life together and God's people sharing love together in such a way that anyone who walks in should be able to see that and experience it for themselves.

[31:05] And that's something that starts on Sundays. That's why our times of worship together are super important, but that extends into our homes as well. You know, if we have, if we're parents and we've got kids, every time friends of our kids come into our home, that's an opportunity for them to experience something of Christian community.

Think about the gathering, a CU or a community group as a place where Christians can then invite someone else in so that they can hear and feel and sense what God's love looks like.

That we'd be asking ourselves the question, together, can we shine the spotlight on Jesus by loving others well? Because by God's design, the clue is to be a place marked by love for one another.

Let me leave you with the idea of the light display from this church. You know, Jesus said to his disciples, to us, if we're Christians, you are the light of the world. And that light that we are to shine is the light of God's sacrificial, self-giving, grace-driven love.

It is this Jesus who gladly laid down his life for us who says to us, we should love one another. So let's pray together.

[32:32] Our God and our Father, we thank you that we come to the God who is love. And we thank you that you have shown us your love in giving us Jesus to be our atoning sacrifice in his willingness to lay down his life in order to forgive us and to redeem us and to bring us back to our God.

And Lord, we pray that as we experience more of your love, you would enable us to love one another, not just when it's easy, but also when it's costly. Help us to be ready to sacrifice knowing that you have sacrificed infinitely more to show your love for us.

And Lord, we pray that as we sense that we do love Jesus, even if it's not perfect, and as we do love the church, even if we don't always do it perfectly, that that would serve to assure us that we are your children, that these are instincts that belong to the children of God.

And so we pray that you'd help us in this week to live as the children of God, as we would seek to love you and to love one another. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.