

From Love to Life

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Thanks for that scripture reading, Maddie, and good morning, Christ Church.

My name is Andrew. I'm one of the pastors here. If you're new, we're glad you're here and looking forward to getting to know you and introducing you to our church and what we're about here. We're about to continue our series in 1 John, but will you join me in prayer before we hear what God has to say to us?

Father, we want to listen to what you have to say in your holy scriptures, your divinely inspired letter to this early church.

And God, we want to be transformed more and more into the image of your Son. Would you do that among us today by the power of your Spirit?

[1 : 1 1] Would you help us to be who we already are, children of God, people made in the image of God, who love like our Father? Would you inspire us, O God, but by your love for us?

Would that make us different people and would that make our world a different world? We pray that earnestly this morning, God, in your Son's precious name.

Amen. So we're making our way through 1 John, as many of you know. And what this letter is basically trying to communicate to its original readers is that, hey, I know that your community of faith, I know that your early church community has gone through a lot of painful loss.

And I know how disorienting and I know how confusing that could be. But, hey, dear children, my dear children, you made the right choice. You made the right choice to stick around in the church.

You made the right choice to hold on to the original teaching of Jesus and his apostles and to keep their commandments and to walk in light and love. You chose the way of life.

[2 : 1 8] That's what 1 John is saying. You chose the way of life by staying and listening to the words of Jesus. You chose the way of abundance and eternal life with God. So hold on to what you heard from the beginning because, really, I promise you, it's saying.

It's saying, I promise you, there is no better news than this. And then it says, see what kind of love the Father has given to us. This is the good news. See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God.

And so we are. This is a one-of-a-kind love, a love like no other in all the history of all the world. A father adopting hostile, runaway orphans into his family forever.

A father receiving broken children as they are. And yet resolving to make them everything they were meant to be. For we shall be like him, right? For we shall see him as he is.

And this Father, he does it, what? All at his own expense. At the expense of his only begotten son, his perfect son. What sort of love is this? What can compare? So 1 John's saying, hold on.

[3 : 19] Hold on to this life, light, and love that you embraced from the beginning. Because when you do, even when the world, even when those who have left our church might suggest a million other alternative ways to live, when you walk in your heavenly Father's way of life, light, and love, you make it plain to all the world that you are truly children of God.

That you truly belong to your Father in heaven. And when you love, this is how you will know, and this is how everyone else will know who and whose you are. Because they'll see your Father in you.

You know, when my daughter, Cammie, was just a couple months old, we took her to the church where me and Chelsea started dating. And I remember just walking around, showing her off to everyone.

And I took her to one of the elders of our church. And as he beheld our firstborn daughter, he said, Wow, no DNA test required. No DNA test required.

See, this poor little girl, she looks like me. And increasingly so each day. And she doesn't just look like me, she acts like me. She's a little goofball, she enjoys slapstick humor, and her idea of a perfect afternoon is a Disney movie with a bag of Cheetos.

[4 : 38] She's just like her daddy. And I look at her, and my friends and my family look at her as well. And just like my friend at this church, we all say, Yeah, no DNA test required.

By what she looks like, by how she lives, by what she loves, it's unmistakable. We all know that this little girl is a child of Andrew Ong.

And so it is with the children of God. We have the very DNA of our Father if we've been united with God in Christ. The Father cannot but beget children of God, who increasingly look like Him, and who increasingly love like Him.

And that's where we're at here in 1 John, verse 10. Look with me. This is how we know who the children of God are, and who the children of the devil are. Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.

Verse 11. For this is the message you heard from the beginning. We should love one another. We should love one another. All right? Now maybe you're here today, and you're like, love one another again?

[5 : 51] Right? Yeah. Yawn. Tell me something I don't already know. And honestly, I had a long moment like that this week, where I was right there with you. In my mind, I was like, man, I came up here last Sunday without a sermon, and I don't want to shoot two air balls in a row.

I hope this text gives me something good that I can really work with. And I came to this text, and it said, love one another. It's like, oh, something everyone already knows and agrees with. How am I going to make this fresh and interesting?

And I think that for a lot of us, especially for those of us who have been in the church for quite a while, when we hear this love one another stuff, it's so easy to just sit back and cruise past this message we've heard a million times, even outside the church, but especially inside the church, right?

Yeah, I know. I know. I get it. I get it. I get it. Love one another. Sure, I could always hear it more, I guess, because I'm not perfect, but for many of us, love one another, it really just sounds more like a cliché platitude, right?

It sounds like a forgettable reminder. It maybe just feels like a weak little brief slap on the wrist, right? Oh, love one another. Yeah, I should do that better, right? So it's like, thanks for the reminder, and I'll try to remember, but oh, hey, the sermon's done.

[7 : 07] Service is over. Bible's closed. Time to get on with my life, right? And you know, maybe some of us who are extra holy might be at Trader Joe's and have an opportunity to share some groceries with that houseless person hanging out outside, and we'll be like, oh, yes, I applied God's word.

I showed love to someone else. Maybe we'll go home and do an extra chore and say, oh, good job me. I loved one another. I applied the word of God. Look at me. But this is such a shallow way of obeying the core ethical teaching of Jesus.

Is this all that Jesus had in mind, doing nice things, when he commanded his followers to love one another? Just some garden variety, niceness, and decency.

Is that all Jesus had in mind? Was Jesus just like, yeah, you know, just do some good stuff, send some positive vibes, be nice to people, try to put more love out into the universe, try to push the needle a little bit closer toward world peace?

Or didn't Jesus say that our love, when patterned after his own, was supposed to be the most uniquely compelling thing that testified and bore witness to who exactly his people were in all the world?

[8 : 21] A new commandment I give to you, he says, that you love one another just as I have loved you. You also are to love one another. Just as God loves, you are to love.

And by this, he says, by this, by your love for one another, all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

And I want to let that sit with us for a second. Jesus' command to love one another. Because Jesus' command to love one another is about so much more than niceness and charity.

This exhortation to love one another here in 1 John is not some repetitive command we're just supposed to obey. You know what it is? It's an explanation of what human beings were always meant to be.

It's an explanation of the truest, most beautiful expression of the human identity. Just as Jesus said, By this, all people will know who you are, my disciples, if you have love for one another.

[9 : 22] 1 John is saying, By this, all people will know that you are children of God, if you have love for one another. Loving one another is not just a mere suggestion.

It is the very identity of people who are made, of people who are in right relationship with their maker. It's what distinguishes children of God who are truly alive, and children of the devil who are actually dead.

1 John is not simply trying to modify behavior and generically make us into more loving, compassionate, and empathetic people. It's not trying to just make the world a progressively nicer, kinder, warmer, gentler, more peaceful place, one good deed at a time.

1 John is not simply commending niceness here like any one of my daughters, you know, Arthur and Fancy Nancy or Llama Llama Red Pajama books. 1 John's exhortation to love is rooted in a far bigger story.

A far bigger story than that naive, wishful story of human self-progress. 1 John's exhortation to love as children of God is rooted in a better story.

[10 : 31] The ultimate story, the cosmic story of the world that's told in the scriptures, in which there are two kinds of people. The children of God and the children of the devil. The offspring of the woman Eve and the offspring of the serpent.

The story of attention and an antithesis introduced into God's good creation when his first children, made in his image, ignored the voice of their father and listened to the voice of the devil, the serpent.

When 1 John speaks about loving one another here, it has in view this gracious, redemptive story of a father reaching out to transform the identities of his self-orphaned children.

So again, you have to understand that love one another in 1 John is not simply telling us to obey a rule we already know and we've heard a thousand times. 1 John is saying that this is a matter of who and whose we are.

Children of God or children of the devil. And thus it's a matter of life or death, of ultimate victory or ultimate defeat. As God foretold in the wake of the fall, though the serpent would wound the heel of the woman's offspring, it would ultimately be that same wounded heel that would trample upon the serpent's head in triumph.

[11 : 41] So you see, our passage today isn't simply about obedience and kindness, it's about who and whose we are in the grand and cosmic scheme of history before God.

The God of creation and the God of new creation. And this is important because if we only understand love for one another as a rule or as a suggestion or as a noble principle to try to live by, we will never feel the weight.

We will never feel the urgency of God's deep and profound intentions for our lives and for who we were meant to be. See, to not love is not simply to break a rule.

It's to be a child of the devil. It's to be even a murderer. Remember, look with me at how seriously 1 John speaks about what it means to not love. Look at the transition from verse 11 to 12.

A literal Greek translation would say, We should love one another not as Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. This is saying that you either love one another or you are just like murderous Cain.

[12 : 46] And for those of us who are unfamiliar with the story of Cain and his brother Abel from the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, Genesis chapter 4, after the fall of creation, what happened was Adam and Eve, the first two humans, they had their firstborn child named Cain.

And while Adam and Eve hoped that this offspring would help lead them into victory over the serpent, right, because that's what God had promised, that some offspring from the woman would lead the world into triumph over the serpent, while Adam and Eve hoped that this offspring's heel would one day crush the serpent's head once and for all, Cain was not that.

But instead, he actually trampled upon his own brother. In fact, he turned out to be the spiritual offspring of the serpent, a child of the devil. And so this firstborn son of theirs, Cain, when he saw that his younger brother Abel had offered a righteous and acceptable sacrifice to God, while his own lesser offering was not accepted by God, he raged at God and he raged at his brother and he killed his brother with no remorse but only continual self-interest.

The firstborn son of Adam and Eve, on whom they placed their hopes for the salvation of the whole world, killed the very next human being born to his very own parents, his own flesh and blood.

And then he had the audacity to talk back to God. He said, Am I my brother's keeper? Oh, my bad. Was I obligated to take care of my little brother to make sure that he lived and flourished and thrived?

[14 : 22] And in Cain's interaction with God, we see that all he's actually worried about is the revenge people might take upon him for what he did. All he cares about is the preservation of his own life.

And then what does he do? We learn that he goes and he builds a city. Why? To protect himself. And he has offspring and they're skilled and they cultivate music and they make instruments and they are very skilled with livestock.

But they're all just as self-interested as him. And even though they create good cultural things, they rule by power and might and violence because that is the only way they know how to survive and thrive.

Through dominance. One of Cain's descendants, Lamech, he even sings. He even makes music about murder. That is the line of the children of the devil.

And these are the beginnings of that worldly theory of life. Survival of the fittest. Survival by self-protection. And this has been the MO of all the devil's children, right?

[15 : 28] And so much of this broken world that we live in. We see it all around us, don't we? Even in our own hearts, right? And so what 1 John is saying when it says, we should love one another not as Cain, it's saying that the opposite of love is not just apathy or malice.

The opposite of love is assault and murder. To not love is not some inconsequential, insignificant breach of a rule book.

It's the very way of the devil. It's participation in murder and inherently resentful opposition to all that is good and just and righteous. Verse 12, To not love is to hate.

And in particular, it's to hate what is good with a destructive, murderous intent. So whether or not we love, this is a life and death matter for us and for others.

1 John is saying that there is a deathly quality about not loving others. Verse 14, We know that we have passed from death to life because we love each other.

[16 : 45] Anyone who does not love remains in death. Verse 15, Anyone who hates a brother or a sister is a murderer. And you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.

So 1 John doesn't mince words here. You either love and so prove to be a child of God, or you don't and so prove to be a murderous child of the devil.

The Greek word here for murder is anthropoktanos. It literally means people killer. People killer. And I know that this may sound so extreme, right? To consider all those who don't love as dead and children of the devil and as people killers.

But what 1 John is indicating to us with all this radical language is the radical nature of love. The radical nature of love. See, if we are truly to embody this loving ethic of Jesus, not in some superficial way that just treats love for one another as a mere rule to be obeyed, but as central to our very identities as human beings, what we all need to understand is that loving others is not simply about niceness or doing favors or just helping people.

No, according to 1 John, loving others is more than an add-on luxury we owe. I'm sorry. Loving others is more than an add-on luxury that we offer. It's the abundant life that we owe.

[18 : 10] I'll say that again. Loving others is more than an add-on luxury that we offer. It's the abundant life that we owe. And I want to unpack that. See, if to not love is to be a murderer, then to love is to be a life-giving presence.

A presence that pursues the thriving and the flourishing of all whom we come across. I like how C.S. Lewis puts it. He says, Love is not affectionate feeling, but a steady wish for the loved person's ultimate good as far as it can be obtained.

And if we think about love this way, as pursuing people's ultimate good, then the command to love one another is not something extra that we do, like an add-on luxury given to some lucky people that we decide to love but didn't necessarily deserve it.

No, if the opposite of love is murder, and if love is to be a life-giving presence, then love is more than an add-on luxury we offer. It is the abundant life we owe to all people.

It's what we are obligated to do. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. We are obligated to pursue all human flourishing for all people.

[19 : 19] And this was quite a profound revelation to me this week, because, you know, when I was preparing for this sermon, and I was trying to figure out, okay, God, what are you saying to me, personally, about how to love other people in my own life?

Maybe you can identify with me that whenever you hear this love one another stuff, your first instinct is pretty superficial. Like, I was like, okay, I guess I gotta figure out what extra tasks I might add on to the list of other good things I'm already trying to do for others.

Maybe I'll vacuum for Chelsea this week or something like that, right? Maybe I'll invite some lonely people over to my house to have dinner. I don't know. But see, when I thought of loving others as simply about doing more nice things for people, I was thinking of it primarily in terms of me being generous and gracious and charitable with my time, talent, and treasures in order to just give someone a little, you know, a little bump of kindness for the week, make their day, maybe.

You know, just grace my wife with the luxury of not having to vacuum at night. But if loving others is more about being an abundant, life-giving presence, then it shouldn't be primarily about what I might offer to some people.

It's about what I owe to all people. My pursuit of their abundant life and their ultimate good. I think that the Dalai Lama was right when he said, Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries.

[20 : 48] Without them, humanity cannot survive. Or consider the divinely inspired words from Apostle Paul in chapter 13 of his letter to the Romans, Owe no one anything except to love each other.

See, when we think about loving others in terms of what we can offer rather than what we owe, it makes us casual. It makes us casual about Jesus' command to love one another.

Like, love is just a charitable gift to bestow at our own discretion. There is no urgency because even though Jesus commanded love, it still somehow feels optional when we think of love as just something that we can offer to others.

But if we think of love as something we owe, the whole conversation shifts from what we do to who we are and who our neighbors are.

See, it's all about identity. It's all about who we and our neighbors are. Every human being, a person of significance, with dignity and potential because we are made in the image of God.

[21 : 50] Every human being, from the womb to the tomb, a person whom God himself wants to see thrive and experience the fullness of his abundant life and shalom. From the helpless unborn child to the vulnerable pregnant mother to even the most heinous and undeserving dictator, we owe every human being love.

We are obligated to posture ourselves toward all people's flourishing, to open our hearts and our hands to all people seeking their ultimate good. That's what it means to love.

It's more than vacuuming. Now, I'm actually going to save verses 19 and following for next time. I wasn't able to get there. But I want to wrap up by looking at verses 16 to 18.

And I want to talk about what this might look like to love. What does it look like to love in this way where we are trying to embody a life-giving presence? Verse 16 says, So in case you were wondering what the standard of love is, what the best illustration of love is, what the very definition of love is, 1 John says, Look no further than at Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for us.

Now, what does it mean to lay down our lives for others just like Jesus did? Well, Jesus himself uses this language in John's gospel. He uses this language to describe his love for people.

[23 : 23] In John chapter 10, he says, I am the good shepherd, right? I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. So let's consider that illustration.

Try to imagine, try to envision that, right? Now, when we hear lay down his life, some of our minds immediately go to the ultimate sacrifice of life at the cross, right? Where Jesus gave up his life to destroy death and sin forever and to save his people.

And this is definitely an important part of this. Some of us might one day be called to embody this greatest sacrifice of love for another. But what we also need to hear, and I think what 1 John has more in mind is that laying down a life is not just about a single sacrificial act and task.

In his classic devotional, Oswald Chambers, it's called My Utmost for His Highest. And he talks about how Jesus laid down his life for us, not just in the act of the cross, but every single day, every single second of his life, all the way leading up to the cross.

And even now, as he intercedes for us at the right hand of God, his whole life, his whole life was given to us. His whole life laid down for us.

[24 : 35] So again, think about this shepherd, all right? Sure, he might put his life at risk when a thief or a wolf comes to threaten the lives of his sheep, right? But a good shepherd doesn't just care for his sheep in their most dire moments, but also in their dullest moments.

A good shepherd has given the entirety of his life to one thing, being a life-giving presence to his sheep, day in and day out. Yes, protecting sheep from others and from themselves, but also feeding them, guiding his sheep, mending their wounds, finding his lost sheep, rescuing them from ditches, making sure they get along with each other and treat each other right, knowing them by name and personality and behavior, maybe even being physically affectionate with his sheep.

So Christchurch, who might God be calling us to protect or feed or guide or mend or reconcile or show affection to or even to just see and recognize and acknowledge and know?

And let's be open-minded before God about this and willing to think outside of the box because remember, Jesus also said, I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also.

Who are the unexpected people? The not-so-easy, not-so-obvious people, God might be calling us to not just love with a random single act of kindness, but to lay down our lives for.

[25 : 56] Who might God be calling us to be a constant life-giving presence to? Verse 17 says, If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need, but has no pity on them, literally in the Greek, if anyone sees a brother in need but closes his heart to them, how can the love of God be in that person?

Whose needs do we see around us? And are our hearts opened or are they closed? Or do we even see? Do we even see the needs around us?

Like, I wonder, even for those of us who want to put in that extra effort into being more fully human and thus loving more fully, how much do we realize that this means first putting more effort into just seeing the need that's around us?

Maybe for some of us today, the first question isn't how or who to love, but how to even see the need around us? How to even come into proximity with it and to understand it?

This is why I love our Care Portal ministry. I just opened up a letter from the Care Portal organization this morning congratulating us, thanking us for the milestone of having served 10 families in this past ministry year.

[27 : 10] 10 families that we were able to provide furniture for, maybe gift cards to help with groceries, help them get a bed, various different kinds of things. And I want to say thank you, Christ Church. I love Care Portal ministry because me, you know, in my middle-class suburban lifestyle, I often won't come across certain kinds of needs that are definitely out there.

And I'm not, I shouldn't just merely depend on Care Portal to alert me to the needs in my community, but this is a start, and this is why we encourage this ministry here in our church.

We need to see. What are we doing to see better the needs of our brothers and sisters? And I know this sounds like even more work, because it is. It is.

But my dear children of God, we have to do the work. We have to do the work. All of it. Because as it says in verse 18, and this is the Andrew Wong translation, Yes, this is a high and a heavy, heavy calling.

But remember, it's just a calling to be who we already are in Christ. It's a calling to be our truest and best selves, children of God who have been shown the greatest life, light, and love the world's ever seen.

[28 : 42] For if the children of God, for whom Christ laid down his life, if the children of God who believe in the resurrection and have a shared imperishable inheritance with Christ of ultimate value that can never be lost, if the securest, most beloved children of our Father in heaven will not go in the name of Jesus and in the power of his Spirit to love and serve this world as a life-giving presence, laying down our lives, which we know are forever safe in the hands of God, who else will?

Who else will? Who else can afford to but the children of God, adopted, redeemed, raised, and ascended in Christ? We must go.

We must go.