

"The Mark of a Christian"

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[0 : 00] In case you're wondering, my name is Billy Nile. I'm an associate pastor here. Pastor Mike, our lead pastor, is at Village Church of Gurnee this morning.

He is giving personal thanks for their kind gift and offering to help our King's Place ministry, and so he is out there this morning.

If you would turn in your Bibles to 1 John 3, 1 John chapter 3. Remember, 1 John is a little letter toward the back of your Bible, and I'm going to begin by reading this passage this morning.

It's found in verses 11 to 18 in chapter 3. I'm going to get a running start starting at verse 10. Read God's Word with me and receive it as such.

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.

[1 : 07] For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. Why did he murder him?

Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death and 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. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

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.

Thanks be to God for his word. What comes to your mind when I say the word high school? It could be a lot of things, some a guessing, some positive, some negative, some nostalgic, some nightmarish.

[2 : 31] One thing that might come to your mind is groups. High school is full of groups. Stereotypically, you've got the jocks, the nerds, the popular crowd, the misfits, and each group has their kind of distinguishing mark.

Based on their behavior, their attitude, their speech, their clothes, you can usually kind of figure out where each high schooler fits just by observing them.

Jocks tend to wear sport jerseys, and they walk confidently. Nerds tend to run around with disheveled hair and clothes, and they passionately discuss video games with each other.

The popular crowd tends to dress very fashionably. They're very active on Instagram. So how each student acts or speaks or dresses tends to make it clear to everyone that they fit into this group or that group.

What about Christians? Obviously, we're a group. We have a common identity that makes us a group. What sets us apart? What visible, observable evidence can the world point to and say, yeah, those are Christians, and we know that these are Jesus' people because they're like this?

[3 : 58] It could be because we have a little fish on the back of our cars sometimes, everywhere crosses around our necks. That could be it. Even better, we have a common set of beliefs and values that we hold, and that sets us apart as a group.

We kind of speak the same way. We have this shared vocabulary that kind of makes us a group.

But what really tells us apart? Such that if it's missing, the world won't know who Jesus is like.

It should be our love. Our love for one another. That should be the mark of a Christian. Years ago, a man named Francis Schaeffer wrote a little book called The Mark of a Christian.

I totally ripped his title. I recommend you find it online or pick up a copy. It's not a copy. It'll take you like an hour to read. It's very, very short.

And the whole book is a reflection on what Jesus said to his disciples in John 13, 35. By this, all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

[5 : 08] And one of the people who heard Jesus speak these very words was John the Apostle. And he wrote this letter that we're studying this morning. And he wrote it to a church in the Roman province of Asia, particularly the city of Ephesus.

And one of John's favorite themes to dwell on, particularly in this letter, but all throughout all of Scripture. In fact, if you do a study of the use of the word love or loving or anything like that, and you kind of graph which each of the Bible uses that the most.

It's like the other books are kind of like this. John is like this. He talks about love all the time.

Because he's very concerned that these Christians continue to obey Jesus' command to love one another.

Because if we're characterized by love, then that's evidence that we do indeed belong to Jesus.

That we are born of God. And that's the big idea of the particular passage we're studying this morning.

If you want to jot this down, it's if we are born of the Father, we will love the brothers. If we are born of the Father, then we will love the brothers.

[6 : 15] And by the way, when I say brothers, I'm not trying to be gender exclusive. That's just shorthand for fellow Christians. Brothers and sisters. Male and female. Our brotherly love within God's new family in Christ, within the church, is evidence that we are born of the Father.

That we belong to his family. So we're going to walk through this passage. I'm going to unpack this big idea for us. I want to point out five ways that John describes our brotherly love for each other as Christians.

They all start with the letter C. So five C's this morning. First, brotherly love is central to the Christian message. Brotherly love is central to the Christian message.

We see that in verse 11. For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Before we move on, let me just define two things that he says right here.

First, love one another. That doesn't mean like sentimental feelings of affection. Love can include sentimental feelings of affection for other people. But that's not what love primarily is.

[7 : 26] John is talking about love in action. Caring about the well-being of others and doing something about it. John is saying actively care about and do good to each other.

And the second thing I want to define is this. When John says from the beginning, he's talking about when this particular church in Ephesus heard and received the good news of Jesus.

When their walk with Jesus started. When they first heard it and responded. So, apparently what John is saying here is that at least part of the Christian message that was communicated to them in the beginning was love each other.

Now, to be honest, the theologian in me is a little surprised when I hear this. Because at first glance, it kind of sounds like John is saying the good news of the gospel is love one another.

It's a moral command. When I know that other parts of scripture say that the good news of the gospel is not so much do this, but it is done. What Christ has done for us to save us from our sins.

[8 : 30] I don't think John is confusing the gospel of grace with a gospel of good works here. I don't think that's what he's doing. I think what he's doing is reminding these Ephesians of how the command to love each other is so closely linked to the central message of Christianity.

Which is God's love for sinners revealed in the cross of Jesus. If you look across the page in your Bible to 1 John 4 verses 10 and 11, which is our memory verse for this month, take a look at this and we'll see how it helps us.

In this is love. Not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. And then we see it really compactly in the next sentence.

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. Did you hear that? They go hand in hand. God's love for us in Christ, our love for the brothers.

It's almost as if they're two sides of the same coin. They go together like a wink and a smile. If we've been loved by God in such a marvelous way that Christ would die for us and bear the Father's wrath for our sin, then doesn't it immediately follow that we ought to be characterized by love for everyone, the same kind of love, especially for our fellow Christians.

[9 : 51] Brotherly love is not some kind of optional add-on to the Christian faith for the really committed ones. It's not some kind of obscure, specialized discipleship 601 course that you take after you've been a Christian for a few decades.

There aren't the kind of normal Christians and then the really loving Christians. The command to love one another is intimately connected with who you are as a Christian because you've been loved by God in Christ.

In fact, according to church tradition, the Apostle John, who lived to an extremely old age, he would be carried to the church's gatherings in the city of Ephesus.

He could barely talk above a whisper. And the thing he said over and over and over to them was, little children, love one another. Little children, love one another.

And some of the people who heard him do this, he kind of got annoyed after a while. They're like, teacher, why do you say this so much? And he would respond, because it is the Lord's commandment. And if it alone is kept, it is sufficient.

[11 : 00] If this commandment of our Lord is so central to the very essence of our faith, it must also be central to our lives and the way we live.

I don't want to linger too much here because we're going to touch on this a lot later, but I need to ask at least this. Do you consider your treatment of others, especially your fellow Christians, to be central to your faith?

Or do you tend to consider your treatment of others as an optional add-on that you can pursue on good days when you're feeling particularly Christian-y?

Our brotherly love is and must be central to our faith. Second, brotherly love confirms who we are and aren't.

Brotherly love, our brotherly love for others, confirms who we are and aren't. We're going to spend a little more time on this because John spends quite a bit of time on it.

[12 : 01] Last week, Pastor Mike used an illustration about how similar he and his dad are. They tend to laugh the same way, work the same way, they like the same things, they have similar physical traits.

This is because Mike Salvati, to put it the way John does, is born of Steve Salvati. When you are fathered by someone, you, not always, but often, reflect their characteristics, their values, their way of being.

The same is very true in many ways of me and my father. It's just kind of who I am because he's my father. What about those who have God as their father? What are they like?

John introduces this idea of being born of God back at the end of chapter 2, verse 29. Take a look at it. Everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

So God's offspring, God's children, they share his family resemblance. They do what is right, just as he does what is right. And now, in verse 10, skip forward a little bit, we see a black and white contrast between those who are fathered by God and what they are like, and those who are fathered by the devil, what they are like.

[13 : 21] Look at verse 10. 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.

Do you hear that key word evident in verse 10? The righteous and loving way we live as Christians provides a proof, evidence, a mark of who we truly are as God's children.

How we live our lives confirms who we are and who we aren't. We live our lives, either God's children or children of the evil one.

Those who do not do what is right, whose lives are not characterized by love, are demonstrating who their father is. Not God, but the devil. Because the devil has been a liar and a rebel and a murderer from the beginning.

And in case you think John's kind of going off the rails here, this is what Jesus said exactly, almost the same kind of language back to the Pharisees in John chapter 8. So John's just unpacking what Jesus said.

[14 : 28] In verses 12 to 15, John unpacks this more and he teases it out. In verse 12, he brings in this Old Testament character of Cain, who was the first offspring of Adam and Eve.

And he was jealous of his brother Abel. He hated him and then murdered him. Take note of the progression. Starts in the heart and then works itself out in the actions.

For John to kind of drop Cain's name here had the same effect on his audience as if you drop Hitler's name today. When we hear Hitler, we think, oh, murderer, evildoer, par excellence. That's what his audience would think when they heard Cain. And notice what John says of Cain. He is of the evil one. In other words, Cain's father was not God, but Satan.

He imitated Satan, not God. And then in his actions confirmed him to be that. Then John says in verse 13, don't be surprised, brothers, if the world hates you.

[15:30] Why? Because the world is like Cain. The world imitates Satan, the father of those who hate, rebel, and murder. They're children of the devil, not children of God. Then look at verses 14 and 15.

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.

John changes his language around a little bit here. He starts talking about death and life, but he's getting at the same idea. He's saying your brotherly love confirms that you are indeed a child of God, that you've been moved out of spiritual death and into spiritual life.

You don't abide in death anymore. You have eternal life abiding in you. And the opposite is true for the children of the devil, those who are characterized by jealousy, hatred, indifference to the well-being of others, full of self-love.

They're just proving that they still abide in death. Now, John's not mincing words here. This is classic John the Apostle. He uses really strong black and white language to paint a crystal clear spiritual truth.

[16:44] Either we're born of God, we're his children, we abide in light and life, and we imitate his love, or we are children of the devil. We are abiding in darkness and death, and we imitate Satan's hatred.

There's no third way. There's no middle ground in the middle between the two. Now, we should let John's strong language have full effect. It's right to let God's sword wound us with conviction every once in a while and help us see our sin, help us see our tendency to be loveless or to be indifferent to the well-being of others, to be self-absorbed.

Perhaps some of you do need to hear this this morning and be shaken out of a loveless self-absorption. It's possible to be a disciple of Jesus, but to grow cold in your affection toward him and toward your church family, to be absorbed with your own stuff and not thinking about the well-being of others.

This should put healthy fear in our hearts. That's good. Scripture's good at doing that. And it's good for us to say, Wait a minute, I'm a child of God. I'm not a child of Satan. I need to love my brothers. If that's you, deal with that. Take that to Jesus. Repent of that lovelessness and turn around and move toward Jesus and toward others in love.

[18:07] But at the same time, although it's right for us to let Scripture shake us a little bit here, the purpose, I think, of this is less for wounding us with conviction and more for assurance.

Look at verse 14 again. We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers. John's confident that these people love each other.

He's confident that they are truly born of God, that they have been brought out of death and into life. And so what he's saying here is confirmation of, Yes, you do love the brothers.

Not perfectly, but you do. And you are indeed children of God. As I was preparing to preach this sermon, I began to feel an appropriate amount of fear and trembling here.

Because I know my own self-absorption. I know my own lack of love. And boy, I've got a lot of self to put to death still. And a lot of ways to grow in loving others.

[19:04] But it was also helpful to remember, and God helped me with this, ways in which I have been loving others. Ways in which I have laid down my life in one sense to love others lately.

And that's not natural to my sinful heart. So it was a comfort to me, not as a boasting, but of, Wow, God's doing this in me. He's starting to work this in me. Not perfectly, but step by step, I'm learning. And I'm becoming one who knows how to love the brothers. The other day, one of our kids, who particularly struggles with caring about and doing good to others, spontaneously shared something with his brother, whom he particularly has a hard time loving.

And Jess and I nearly went ballistic with praise and affirmation of, Yeah, you did it. That's what you're supposed to do. There's something going on underneath the surface. This is great.

And that's how our father is with us. He celebrates the evidence of his spirit's work in us when we act in Christ-like love toward our brothers and sisters.

[20 : 07] It's not perfect, but it does confirm that we are indeed children of God. So, brotherly love is central to our faith. It confirms who we are and who we aren't.

And thirdly, brotherly love is challenged by a hateful world. Brotherly love is challenged by a hateful world. This will be brief. Did you notice what John says in verse 13?

Don't be surprised, brothers, if the world hates you. It kind of seems a little bit out of place. Why is he saying that right here? Well, remember what this church had just gone through. There had been some false teachers who had infiltrated the church, had convinced some of the members of this church of this false teaching, and there had been a church split.

And no doubt, based on some evidence we read in this letter, it had been hurtful and hateful. The church that remained had been hurt, had been betrayed, and no doubt they had been on the receiving end of some hateful or slanderous actions by the self-righteous false teachers and their disciples.

And basically what I think John is saying here is they're proving themselves to be in the line of Cain. They're proving themselves to be children of the devil because they're acting out of jealousy. They see your righteous actions, and they're jealous of that, and they are hateful, and they're even murderous in their actions toward them.

[21 : 36] I'm guessing that at one time or other you have been hurt by others in a similar way, maybe treated slanderously or unkindly, maybe spitefully.

If you have, I don't have to tell you that it is very difficult to want the good of those who are hurt and hate you and to love them. These Christians in Ephesus not only needed assurance that they were still being faithful to Jesus, but they also needed a soft reminder to not return evil for evil, to remember that, hey, they're doing this because they are still abiding in death.

You don't. You abide in life. You love the brothers, and you are able to love like Jesus loves. You are children of God.

You are abiding in the light. You're in eternal life. So you don't need to be confused about what's going on here. You don't need to return evil for evil. So just continue loving each other as you are already doing.

Our brotherly love is going to be challenged in this hateful world. As we boldly speak of the truth that is in Jesus, Christians might become even more and more hated because of our insistence on absolute truth or our stances on moral issues.

[22 : 57] But Christian, remember who you are. You've been brought out of death and into life. You are born of the Father. We are not to hate and murder like Cain, who was of the evil one.

We are to love like Christ, who is the perfect son of the God of love. And speaking of which, that sets us up perfectly for the fourth C, which is this, and it's my favorite.

Brotherly love copies the self-giving death of Jesus. Brotherly love copies the self-giving love of Jesus. If we look closely at this passage, we'll see that there are two examples that John gives us. One is the negative example of Cain, whom we should not be like, jealous, self-absorbed, hateful, spiteful, murderous. We should not imitate Cain's example.

But who should we copy? What does brotherly love look like? Look no further than verse 16. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

[24 : 10] If you don't remember anything else from this sermon, remember this verse. Notice how John sets it up. By this we know love. In other words, this is how we know what real love looks like.

The love of Jesus is not just a great example. It is the gold standard. It's the very definition of brotherly love. Jesus placed his life in the hands of brutal men because he cared about your eternal well-being.

That is love. Jesus himself said it in John 15. Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

The exact same words. It is costly. It is self-giving. It is sacrificial. And it is oriented to the good of others.

Let's just take a minute. We can't rush past this. Let's take a minute just to gaze at the self-giving death of Jesus on behalf of those who rebelled against him.

[25 : 23] God the Son, the apple of his Father's eye, willingly obeyed his Father, humbled himself, as Paul said in Philippians 2, not only to become a human, not only to become a servant of humans, not only to die for those humans, but to die the shameful, painful death on the cross.

All the way to the bottom is where Jesus went for us. And it wasn't for good people, but for rebellious, blasphemous, hateful, lustful, greedy, self-absorbed, loveless people like you and me. That is love. That's how we know what love is. He gave himself for us. Dear friends, that gold standard of love ought to move us.

Not just sentimentally and emotionally, although it should, but that kind of self-giving love ought to move us toward others. Look at the last half of the verse.

And we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. Our posture toward others, and especially our church family, towards the brothers and sisters in Christ, must be one of self-giving, costly, sacrificial, others-oriented love.

[26 : 55] That word translated ought in the ESV, it has a little more muscle to it than just a soft oughtness. It means we owe something to someone.

We have an obligation to someone. You remember in Matthew 18, Jesus tells the parable of the guy who owed money to the king, and then he got angry at the guy who owed him a little bit of money.

It's the same verb. Why are we owing love to our fellow Christians and to others? Because we have received such a marvelous gift of the love of Christ.

And the giver of that gift expects us to be so transformed and delighted with that gift that we do not keep it to ourselves, but we freely share it with others.

As Christians, we owe it to one another to treat each other with self-giving, sacrificial, costly, or others-oriented love. We owe it because we are in a joyful, eternal debt to our great God and Savior Jesus, because he loved us in laying down his life for us.

[28 : 08] So we lay our lives down for each other. Take just a minute and look around at each other. Just take a moment and look at the other people in this room.

See their faces. See their eyes. It's a sweet thing to see each other. Take a look at the people who are bound to you as family in Christ.

Some of them are like you. Some of them are very different than you. Some of you have a lot in common with. Some you have hardly anything in common with. Some are easy for you to love. Some are harder for you to love. But regardless, these are the people for whom Jesus asks you to lay down your life. To give of your heart, of your affection, of your time, your energy, your money, your home, your comfort.

All for their good. You owe it to them because you owe it to Christ. It will cost you to give of yourself to them just as it cost Jesus to give himself for you.

[29 : 20] And it is right and it is good and it is the distinguishing mark of a community that follows Jesus. It proves that we are born of the Father.

Church, if we do this, if we love each other in a way that copies Jesus' self-giving love for us, then the world will take notice. They will not think of Christians as self-righteous, stuffy, rule followers with arms crossed.

We will be the aroma of Jesus in their nostrils. And they will either hate us all the more or they will say, oh, so that's what Jesus is like.

I think I want to know that, Jesus. We must copy the love of Jesus to each other. And here's how we do that. Let's look at the fifth C.

I apologize. I snuck in two Cs. The fifth C is, brotherly love is compassionate and concrete.

Brotherly love is compassionate and concrete.

[30 : 24] Look at verses 17 and 18. 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. I love where John goes here. He gets really practical. And he gets realistic. He doesn't say, so the next time your brother is about to be martyred in the Colosseum, go and take his place.

I mean, obviously, that would probably be a good thing. But he gets really practical, like really nitty gritty. He says, hey, if you have something your brother needs, give it to him. If you close your heart toward him, you're proving that you have neither understood nor received God's love for you in Christ.

Oosh. Our costly, self-giving, others-oriented love must be concrete and it must be fueled by compassion. The situation that John describes here demonstrates that although this hypothetical brother who comprehends his need of his fellow Christian and knows that he can meet that need, he just literally shuts off the spigot of compassion and a desire to help, and he walks on by. It's like the Levite and the priest in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Walking past the injured man on the road to Jericho, they see the need, they know they can meet it, and they walk by. And John asks a powerful question that we know the answer to.

[31 : 48] How does God's love abide in him? And the answer is it doesn't. Because someone who understands and receives God's self-giving love for them in Christ is going to respond with the same kind of love for someone else because that's what God's children do.

And then in verse 18, John finishes with this final exhortation. To love each other sincerely and concretely, not in word or talk, but in deed and in truth.

Not, I love you brother, I love you sister, I hope everything turns out well for you, but doing something to help meet the need. Perhaps you're thinking something like this right now.

Like, I think I'm a pretty loving person. I don't think I particularly hate anybody. I think I love everybody. But it's good to be challenged a little bit by the words of C.S. Lewis, who says, loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular.

So church, what can this look like? How can we love particular people with real concrete steps towards self-giving, Jesus-copying love?

[32 : 57] Well, we need to start with the people we live with. You're not going to hit a home run every day, but by God's grace, if you're a child of God and you have the love of God abiding in you, you're going to perceive what is best for the people who live with you to meet that need.

So husbands, wives, how do you need to move toward your spouse this week with Jesus-copying, self-giving love?

Fathers, mothers, how do you need to move toward your kids in Jesus-copying, self-giving love this week?

High school or college-age children, if you're in the room, how can you move toward your parents or siblings in Jesus-copying, self-giving love this week?

Now how about us as a church family? How can we move toward each other in Jesus-copying, self-giving love this week? Let me just give you a few ideas.

[34 : 05] This is not an exhaustive list. The Holy Spirit in you is going to give you what you need to love each other way better than this list, but this is a place to start.

First, be postured to be humble and honest and forgiving, especially when you have some sort of conflict.

Be postured to be humble and honest and forgiving because that's how we love each other when there's a difference, when there's a rub, when there's friction. Another thing is to listen.

It's small, but it's big. When we listen and we really care about other people when they're talking about their lives, we lean in.

That is love. It is very practical. A third, and this is huge, is to pray. We throw that word around a lot. I'll pray for you, but when we mean it and we really do it with thoughtfulness and looking at the scriptures of how, what does God want to give this person this week, and we actually go before the throne and we pray for that person in an unhurried way, that is self-giving and costly love.

[35 : 21] Another is showing hospitality. This is difficult in this COVID season. I realize that, but we can all find ways to show hospitality toward one another, even in this tricky season.

A fourth is encouragement. There's a lady in the congregation. I won't say her name, but I love her to death. She is often stuck at home, and she often has lots of time on her hands, and she uses that time to write cards and letters for people in this church.

I'm not going to say her name because it would embarrass her, but it's a wonderful model of I've got the time. I want to love the people. I want to love the brothers, and she does it. Use what you're good at.

Here's another thing. Use what you're good at to serve the body. There's another lady. I'm not going to say who it is, but she does what she's good at, particularly to help this body every week here at the church building.

It's such a good thing to see a sister loving the body in a very practical way to help and serve this body every week.

[36 : 30] Another thing, keep a sharp eye out for needs. Have a postured heart ready to look for needs, and if you need to know what those needs are, find a deacon. Find Billy or John or Randy or Jasmine or Mary or Cindy.

There you go. You got everybody. Find one of the deacons. They tend to know really well what's going on in the congregation and just what practical ways you can meet needs. We need to keep the spigot of compassion in our hearts turned on so that we can love each other with self-giving, Jesus-copying love to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And church, guess what? If we do that, it is the mark that distinguishes us as Jesus' people. It helps us promote a right perspective who Jesus is to a watching world.

This brotherly love is central to our faith, and it confirms who we are as God's people. It does get challenged in this hateful world, but when we love with Jesus-copying love, compassionately and concretely, we show the world what Jesus is like.

So, let's do that this week. If we are born of the Father, if we are loved by the Son, let us love the brothers. Let's pray. Father, no words of mine can translate into love and the work of your Holy Spirit in our hearts, and yet, Jesus, you are so kind to use the words of your word to quicken our hearts to love and good deeds.

[38 : 21] Oh God, would you make us a people who know who we are as your children, who understand and comprehend your great self-giving love for us in Christ, and help us to copy that.

Help us to show the world around us what you are like, what your love is like. Lord, help us not to be like Cain. Lord, guard us from that kind of jealousy and hatred, indifference to others, and self-absorption.

Father, make us a people who love one another earnestly from the heart because we've been transformed by your love. Lord, take us and use us this week.

In Jesus' name, amen.