

Love, the Christian DNA

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[0:00] O Lord, you never fail to help and govern those whom you raise up in your steadfast fear and love. Keep us, we pray, under the protection of your good providence.

And grant that we may always live in the fear and love of your holy name. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Please be seated. Some have said that reading St. John's epistle is like climbing a spiral staircase.

John comes back again and again to the same truth. But each time from an ire and a deeper vantage point. So as you're climbing up, you see that truth presented to you in a different way. And St. John particularly is so consumed with this one theme of love. That the church has started to call him ever since the apostle of love.

And I think that is because love is the preeminent virtue that marks a Christian. We spoke a little bit about this last week. We're continuing in the same vein this week.

[1:16] Because we, like St. John, are climbing this staircase. And it may seem that we're repeating ourselves in some way. But I want us to see this virtue and this command of God from all the vantage points that is afforded us as people of God.

Of the three Christian graces, faith, hope, and love. Paul tells us that love is the greatest. Because it is the one that never ends.

It is the grace in which every other gift and virtue must operate. Without love, everything we do is futile. And has no eternal value.

Faith will one day become sight. We know this. Hope will one day be fulfilled. For love abides forever. Because love is the very life of God into which he is bringing us up.

So let's walk again, again. Go back to John's epistle this morning. And see what John has to say. And let us ask the Lord to make us, in the words of the colleague that we prayed, to have a perpetual love of his holy name.

[2:33] So I invite you to turn again to your Bible, to 1 John, when in chapter 3. If you have the Pew Bible, it's starting in page 12, 11. In verse 11.

John begins in verse 11. And he says, For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning. That we should love one another.

From the beginning, he says. You've heard this. From the beginning, that we should love one another. The beginning he means here, is that from the moment you first heard the gospel.

The moment you first heard the gospel, the command to love has always attended the gospel proclamation. The command to love is not an advanced lesson reserved for mature Christians. It is the command that is woven into the gospel proclamation from the start. So far in this letter, John has spoken much of love. Especially our love for God and the obedience to his word that proves that love.

[3:43] But here, for the first time in the letter, we saw a little bit of last week, as we were in chapter 4 last week. But this is the first time he says six more times in these verses. He talks about love.

He commands us plainly in these verses. Love one another. And he tells us this is how the children of God are known.

By their love for one another. Look down at verse 14. Because here is something remarkable there. We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers.

Whoever does not love, abides in what? Death. John says our love for fellow believers is the assurance that we have been born again.

The fruit of love shows the passage from death into life. This is how indispensable love is. This is the real Christian DNA.

[4:52] And without this family trait, you are not in the family. A man may have right doctrine. He may have a full purse that he can give many gifts to the church generously.

A person may have a respectable reputation. Maybe even a pew with his name on it. We don't do that anymore.

That used to be the custom back in the day. But if he has no love. If a man has all of these things but has no love for the brethren, for his fellow brothers and sisters.

John says, what about this such a man? John says, that man is still abiding in death. This is a serious matter. Is it not? John is telling us that a Christian without this defining trait is dead. And in fact, to be dead is to be no Christian at all. Earlier in his letter, he called such people what the Greeks called hypocrites.

[6:00] Actors with masks fixed over their faces. That's what an hypocrite is. Mouthing their lines while their hearts are somewhere else.

That's how John describes such a person that has no love. With all the other things they may have. All that we do, if it is not done in love for God and for the people of God, is mere play-acting.

Devoid of the life-giving resurrection power of God. And whoever does not love remains in death.

That's plain. John is plain in saying that.

And John is speaking very specifically here. He means, by love, he means devotion to your fellow believer. Look around you for a second.

Just look around the room. I invite you to. He means devotion and love to these people around you.

That's what Paul means. To the household of God.

[7:06] And to make his point, John reaches back in the very first pages, to the very first pages of scripture. And he gives an example. It gives us a negative example.

Of what the absence of love looks like. By giving us the example of Cain. Verse 12. He says, We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one, and murdered his brother.

Now, we remember this story in Genesis 4. Cain is the first born son of Adam and Eve. And Abel was his brother.

And their story shows us exactly where a loveless heart finally arrives. It begins quietly with anger and contempt.

And then it ends in blood. We must let our Lord's own words ring in our ears here. When we look at this story. In Matthew 5, remember what Jesus says.

[8:07] That there are many who commit murder in their hearts. Why? Because what does Jesus say murder is? Anger. Towards your brother. So, whoever nurses anger against his brother, whoever arbors hatred in his heart, has already committed murder in the dark.

The root of anger, sustained anger and bitterness in your heart, and murder, the root is the same. Commonplace things.

Anger, resentment, jealousy, wounded pride, the feeling of being slighted, and disrespected.

Feelings I have certainly known.

I don't know about you. And I suspect though that you have too. These are the seeds. Of murder. These are the seeds.

Of hatred. And anger. And left to grow, they bear the fruit of hatred. And hatred surfaces in a hundred ways.

[9:16] Doesn't it? In slander. You don't actually have to murder somebody. At hatred surfaces in slander and in gossip. At hatred surfaces in twisting the truth to ruin a reputation.

In spreading unflattering information about a brother or sister. And it matters not at all whether we spread a lie or truth. As long as our aim is to wound.

And John's verdict about this is plain to us. Brothers and sisters. He says to us, Such actions are not the actions of someone who loves.

And when they persist in a person's heart or in a community. When they come to mark the whole pattern of our dealings with one another.

They show that we are not actually born of God. Let us look a little closer at Cain. Because the reason for his crime is instructive.

[10:22] According to Hebrews 11.4, We are told this, By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain. Do not skip over those two words.

By faith Abel offered a more acceptable sacrifice. By faith Abel was approved as righteous. Cain's sacrifice, by contrast, was rejected.

Notice, the Bible never comments on the quality of their two offerings. Because it wasn't about the quality of their offerings. What God weighed was the disposition of their hearts.

Abel's sacrifice was accepted because of his faith. And Cain's rejected. Because of the lack of it.

And yet we see in Genesis 4, The astonishing tenderness of God even towards Cain.

Even as he is walking away from God. The Lord comes to him and says to him, Why are you angry? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, Sin is crouching at the door.

[11:33] Its desire is for you, But you must rule over it. There is God himself, Offering Cain the door of repentance.

For Cain will not have the faith of his brother. Instead of crying out to God for the gift of faith, He hardened his heart. He came to hate his brother, Precisely because of his brother's faith.

And that's the logic of the loveless heart. It cannot bear the goodness, It refuses to share in. Let me just repeat that. Often times, A loveless heart comes from the inability, Or the unwillingness, Or the refusal to bear the goodness, And refusing to share in that goodness.

Don't we see that hatred around the world, Against people who belong to Jesus? The same free offer of the gospel, Is for the whole world. But often times, People who refuse to accept Christ, And receive his goodness, Turn in hatred, Towards those who bear his name.

Cain here is the evil one. In fact, actually, John says, He's of the evil one. And so is the faithless world around us. John has already shown us, That the world, In its rebellion against God, Reigns, In its rebellion against God's reign, Belongs to the seed of Cain.

[13:01] The world belongs to the seed of Cain, Which is actually the seed of the serpent. If you remember Genesis 3.15. And so he says, Do not be surprised, brothers, In verse 13.

Do not be surprised, brothers, That the world hates you. Now, this is an ancient conflict. It's been around, Since the first days of our forefathers, Adam and Eve.

God announced this hatred and enmity, In Genesis 3.15, When he said, The seed of the serpent, Will be at enmity, With the seed of the woman. The promised Messiah.

Jesus Christ. And we see this, This enmity, Being played out. Generations after generations. And everyone who identifies with Jesus, The seed of the woman.

Who practices righteousness. Who carries the family likeness, Of love. Will be hated by the world.

Just as Cain hated Abel. But here the comfort, Folded into the warning there.

[14:10] The world and all who belong to it, Are passing away. Every murderer who hates his brother, John says, Has no eternal life abiding in him.

And he will pass away with the perishing world. That is the negative example. That is what we must not harbor in our hearts. If we will love as God loves, We must ask him, To search our hearts, And to reveal our bitterness, And our anger, And our hatred.

If it be for one another here, Or outside. And to surrender here before the Lord. And now John turns, From the dark example, And he turns to a bright example, In verse 16.

And he says, By this we know love, That he laid down his life for us, And we also lay down our lives, For the brothers. Here we reach the very nature of this love.

It is not just a feeling. It is active. Look at the description there. It lays itself down. This love. And there is no greater example of it anywhere, Than in the person of Jesus Christ.

[15:26] Who showed us perfectly, And supremely, In his life and his intoning death, What this love looks like. This verse is simply a restatement, Of what our Lord told his disciples, In the upper room in John 15.

When he said, This is my commandment, That you love one another, As I have loved you. Greater love, As no one than this, That someone laid down his life, For his friends.

Now John does not mean that we, Here, Are to die for one another, Die for one another, In the way that Christ died for us. Because our death, Cannot save.

Christ's death, Is the once for all sacrifice. His death alone, Can carry your soul, From death to life. But John immediately shows us, How we are to lay down our lives, From one another.

He gets, He gets to showing us, In a very practical way, In verse 17. He says, 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?

[16:42] That's a rhetorical question. To shut up your heart, Against a brother in need, When you have the means, To help him, Is to prove that the love of God, Does not live in you.

And John is utterly concrete here. He's not mixing words. And one helpful commentator, suggests that, John may have in mind, God's whole command, To Israel, In Deuteronomy 15. Where the Lord said, If among you, One of your brothers, Should become poor, You shall not harden your heart, Or shut your hand, Against your poor brother. For you shall open your hand, To him.

And God has a warning, Against a very particular kind, Of wicked thought here. God says, Take care, In Deuteronomy, God says, Take care, Lest there be an unworthy, Unworthy thought, In your heart.

What is an unworthy thought? There's the calculating thought, That the year of release, Is near. Because God calls Israel, He makes it a lot, To help one another, To give generously to the poor. [17 : 54] But there's a year of release, The year of Jubilee, When all that is hold, Is just restored. Whether it's fully paid or not. And so, The calculating thought is, If the year of Jubilee, Is next year, And this brother is in need, In desperate need now, I can't lend him money, Because, He's not going to pay it back, Before the year of Jubilee.

And all the debt will be cancelled. And God said, Be warned, Let an unworthy thought, Like that comes into your heart. And you said, The year of Jubilee, The year of release is near.

And so, It is not prudent, To lend to this person in need. Since I shall never see my money back. I want to see that, Let's just mark that carefully.

Because it's not, It seems subtle, But that's how wickedness comes. It comes dressed, In prudence, In practicality.

If I help this person, I will never be repaid. It simply is not sensible, To give, When I know, I will not get it back.

[19 : 10] Better to keep my hand closed. That's the reasoning of the world. And it's not the way of Christ. John wants us to see. Like Christ, We are called, To love.

In what way? Sacrificially. To love sacrificially. How did John describe it? And how did Jesus describe it in John 15?

To lay down our lives, For our friends. That's the manner in which it's described. This sacrificial love. To love with an open hand.

With our resources. And our earthly goods. And our time. And our talents. To lay down for brother or sister in need.

And here's where our Lord's parable, This morning that we read the gospel reading. Here's where it stands, Side by side with the epistle reading. In Luke 14, We see Jesus tells of a man, Who gave a great banquet, And invited many to come to this banquet.

[20 : 16] But when the hour came, The invited guests began to do what? They began to have all sorts of excuses. Why they couldn't come. I bought a field. I must go see it. I bought five yoke of oxen.

I must examine them. I've married a wife. And therefore I cannot come. Each one of them had goods, Prudent, Business, Comfort. Each one of them had reasons For not wanting to come. They've closed their hearts To the master's table. And what did the master do? In return. He did not close his hand in return. He didn't say, Well these are the important people.

The well-known, The well-to-do people. And they can't come to my party. I guess we'll have to cancel it. No. He did not close his hand in return. He flung his doors wider.

Still. He tells his servants, Go out quickly to the streets. And the lanes of the city. Bring the poor. Bring the crippled. Bring the blind. Bring the lame.

[21 : 16] And when there was still room After those people had been brought in, He says, Go out to the highways and the edges. And compel people to come in. That my house may be filled.

Do you see it? The very ones the world will calculate As are not worthwhile. The poor who can never repay. Because they will come to that party.

They're not bringing gifts. The lame who can never offer anything in return. These are the kind of people precisely That the master drags in Up the road.

Into his banquet. That is the open hand of God. That is the love that would not let you go. And every one of us in this room This morning Is at that banquet Only because the master Sent his servants Out to the edges And compelled us To be brought in.

We were the beggars. The blind. The lame. We are the poor. We were carried to the feast. How then can we Who were welcomed by such a love Turn around And close our hand against our

brother.

[22 : 33] Because helping him is not prudent. Because we shall not be repaid. We have been seated At a table We can never afford.

The least we can do In return Is to keep the door open For the next beggar coming in. So John presses the point on In verse 18 He says Little children Let us not love In word Or talk It's easy to love in word and talk But how should we love In deed And in truth To love in deed And in truth Means to be generous And practical In meeting one another's needs Not just giving pleasant platitudes Yes We're thinking of you But we also go Act We move closer to those Who are mourning We come alongside Those Who are Hurting We provide Aid For those Who are in distress We pray

We bring people To God In prayer Those who are hurting God gave that command To Israel To set them apart From the nations To love And to care for one another It means that Their love And generosity Towards one another Would show what To the world around them Will show That they belong to God God gives the same commandment To his church To love one another For the same reason That the world around Will see it And know We belong to God But when we hate one another When we harbor resentment Jealousy Envy In the household of faith What are we doing? We're telling a lie About the very God Who claims to love us And brought us together As a family We are misrepresenting him To a watching world Around us And Jesus said it himself By this All people will know That you are my disciples If you have love For one another Will to God That the church of Christ Would more faithfully Obey The command of our Lord In this regard That we will love In deed And we will love In truth Opening our hands And our hearts To one another Let's just briefly Look at verse 19 To 22 Because Those verses May sound like a Digression But it isn't It's the very heart Of John's pastoral comfort To people Who are trying to love And finding it hard I find these verses Very comforting John says

By this we shall know That we are of the truth And reassure our hearts Before him For whenever our heart Condemns us God is greater than our hearts And he knows everything Beloved If our heart Does not condemn us We have confidence Before God And whatever Whatever we ask We receive from him Because we keep his commandments And do what pleases him John knows our hearts Because he's human like us He knows that when we set out To love sacrificially A small accountant A small ledger keeper Wakes up inside us And you feel it the moment You're about to open your hand The ledger keeper Saying Will I be repaid Is this worth the trouble I will not even get a thank you For this This sacrifice Will go unappreciated It is not worth it We all have this Ledger keeper In our head We do the math If we're honest Every one of us

[26 : 31] Does the math And then we And then when we've done the math We say We find ourselves wanting Our heart turns in And condemns us Because we know We know We should love With open hands And so John says When that happens When the ledger keeper Comes up And we are convicted And we feel sorrow We know we are not loving The way God calls us to love We start to ask ourselves What kind of Christian are you?

Who has to be Argued into loving Your own brother? John has a gentle word For us When that happens A gentle word And a steady answer To comfort us And our condemning heart He says to us God is greater Than our heart And he knows everything He knows When your heart Condemns you Because you fail To live up to Christ Example of a sacrificial love Remember that God Is greater than your heart He knows everything He knows your weaknesses He knows your Your failures He knows where you stumble He knows all of it Your frailty He knows the closeness Of your hand All of it is known to him Far better than Your own accusing Heart can tell Conscience can tell you He knows it And John says That he is greater Than all of it Here's the comforting thing His love And his compassion

Are greater than The smallness Of our hearts This is exactly What the colleagues That we pray This morning Confesses When he calls God The one who never Fails to help And govern Those whom he brings up In his steadfast sphere Of love That's our God Do you hear the comfort In that word Govern Guide Govern means to guide And to rule God does not only Help us When we ask He governs us He rules And guides us Even when we are Stumbling off He rules our very hearts That condemns us And he's bringing up In his children As a good father does Bringing us And helping us To resemble more and more Even As we falter Not even in perfect ways But he's helping us To resemble Our elder brother Jesus Christ And so we go on To pray

When that happens We pray Keep us We pray Lord Under the protection Of your good Governance Of your good Providence That is where Our condemned Heart should go Run to refuge In Christ's love Not to our own Performance What happens Often times When we do When our hearts Condemn us I'm speaking for myself I don't know about you I try to now Outdo myself And I try to make My act of love A performance Because I've been Condemned in my own Heart By my own conscience But that's the wrong Motive I make my act of love Based on my performance Rather than my love For God I confess my sin The fact that I cannot Love my brother Perfectly And I ask God Who loves Both of us Perfectly To help me I rest in his love In his good Governance And even in my Limited way I strive Not in my own Power But in Christ's Power To love That's what God calls us to And that's the Comfort that John Has for us When that happens So when they're Counted inside your head Starts tallying up The cost When your heart Condemns you What are you to do Run to Christ Run to his love Ask God to give Your compassionate heart Where you Find yourself In need of one In that very moment And then In obedience Love Act Act Towards your brother Or towards your sister Move closer to them Open your hand Willingly To the one in need And as you do so Whatever we ask John says in verse 22 Whatever we ask We receive from him

[31:05] Because we keep his commandments And do what pleases him When What John says here Is that If you love Then you can ask God For a Lamborghini That's not what he's saying That's not the whatever he asks He's talking about He's not asking Oh that you can ask him For a five bedroom house Or a million dollars No He's saying That as you do so Whatever we ask Asking in God's will When you feel weak Whatever we ask When you ask God To give you strength To love better Whatever we ask If you ask him for faith To stand upon his word Whatever you ask In his will You will receive from him You can be assured That he will give you Love in your heart Towards your brother When you find him wanting He will give you faith To trust his word When the tally The ledger keeper Comes up in your head If you ask him to help You will receive of him Whatever you ask And so that you may do

What pleases him I'm going to say One more word here If there is an enemy Who will not leave you alone It's the accuser Of the brethren Your conscience convicts you But it's also A greater enemy The enemy Satan He will whisper In your ear That you are a phony You are no real Christian I've seen how you Struggle to love I have watched you Do the math I've watched you Think of yourself Before others You do not belong To the family of God The accuser will come And say that And sometimes Brothers and sisters He will have evidence Against us He will be able to Point to a real failure A close end He will have evidence Of a brother You refusing to forgive Or you've refused to forgive

In the past But when the enemy The accuser Comes in those moments You have an antidote Here's the answer To every accusation When the enemy comes John tells us Believe in the name Of Jesus Christ And you will be saved Even when the enemy Comes Believe in the name Of Jesus Christ And you will be saved Really what he means Is that Keep believing It's an ongoing thing Keep believing In the name Of Jesus Christ And you will be kept For it is written That he never fails To help and govern Those whom He brings up You are not held By the strength Of your love You are held By the strength Of his love Believe in his name When the accuser Comes And you will be saved And the same God Who called you Off the road

From the edges To sit at his table This same God Will keep you Under his protection Under his good will Until the day You're loved Until that glorious day When all our love Is made perfect So here The apostle's Closing word In verse 24 Whoever keeps His commandments Abides in God And God in him And by this We know That he abides In us By the spirit Whom he has Given to us We are not Left alone To do any Of this alone The spirit Of Christ The spirit Of God Himself Has been given To us He is the Down payment Of the feast That we will Enjoy one day When we are Welcoming to that Banquet hall The one who Teaches us To overcome The calculating Heart He is with us The Holy Spirit He will teach us And help us To open our hands To one another To love As we ought to love So Brothers and sisters Let us go From this place Let us go Under the protection Of God's Good providence With a continual Fear And love Of his holy name And let us Love one another Not in word Or talk But in deed And in truth In the name Of the father And of the son And of the holy spirit Amen Thank you Thank you Thank you.