

Love

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Date: 15 January 2006

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[0 : 0 0] Speak to us now, Heavenly Father, from your word we pray that our minds will be enlightened by its truth, our wills be provoked into action, so that in all that we do and think and say we bring glory and honour to the Lord Jesus Christ, love himself. Amen.

Perhaps it's the saddest indictment about churches.

It's probably one of the most common indictments about churches. In many respects, in criticisms of churches that I hear or that I observe, it probably rates close to, if not, number one.

It turns people, its own members, away and alienates them. It shuts the door against the outsider. And far from being a glowing witness, it is the opposite.

The saddest indictment of churches is their lack of love. See, all too often, as we see in church life, maybe we experience in church life, at times we're probably guilty in church life, of blind eyes, closed lips, tight fists, pocketed hands, passing by on the other side.

[1 : 4 7] All too often, that's the body language of too many churches that lack love. Where no one's welcomed, no one's cared for, no one knows anybody, where no one gives, everyone's too busy, or too private, or too selfish.

I know of churches where there's open hostility between church members. Where some church members refuse to acknowledge each other, shake their hands in a greeting of peace, even to speak to each other, almost to be in the same room with each other sometimes.

I know of churches where people just don't speak to anybody else. I know of churches that maybe not necessarily are openly hostile, but where, with a sort of English respectability and politeness and properness, nobody knows anybody, let alone loves them.

The fundamental command of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that we love one another. And here it is at the beginning of this passage.

1 John chapter 3, verse 11, page 990 in the Pew Bibles, if you want to open it. For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

[3 : 1 4] From the beginning, John says, pointing back to Jesus himself, it's a command of Jesus that we love one another. He's referring to Jesus' command the night before he was crucified in the upper room with the disciples, in John chapter 13, for example, that you love one another as I have loved you.

And later in that same speech to the disciples in that upper room, talking about himself giving his life in love, and commanding disciples to love one another.

That is, John's saying this is not a new command. He's not making it up. He's not imbalancing Jesus' priorities, but rather he's highlighting what was Jesus' fundamental command, to love one another.

It's from the beginning, John says. It's authentic. It comes back to Jesus himself. It's not made up. It's not new. It's not an additional command that he's adding to the gospel.

And by saying that it goes back to the beginning, he's in effect showing his own authenticity in what he says, by contrast to the false teachers who keep adding new things, and probably taking away old ones as well.

[4 : 22] And it's love one another that is primarily within Christian fellowship. There is a place for loving the non-Christian and for loving the world, but fundamentally the command is to love other Christians, love one another, love your brothers and your sisters.

And lack of love is no light matter, let me say. It's not a trivial matter. It doesn't fall into the same category as what carpet should be in the church or the color of the cupboards in the church kitchen or matters of high contention like those.

This is fundamental in church life. It's non-negotiable. And we have no excuse for lack of love. That is, we can't say, oh, my excuse for lack of love is that I'm an introvert.

You know, I've done the psychological test. I'm an introvert. Therefore, I don't love other people. That's rubbish. It's a cop-out. I'm an introvert, and I'm under the same command as any other Christian to love one another.

Nor is an excuse our busyness. So often I find myself falling into the trap of being so busy that I almost feel justified in lacking love to some people.

[5 : 33] Now, being caught up in busyness is sometimes just a selfish excuse. Nor is our lack of love justifiable by our upbringing. That is, whether it's a dominant mother or father or dysfunctional family or siblings that we couldn't stand or whatever.

That's just cop-outs in our modern sort of psychological age. It doesn't matter where we come from. It doesn't matter whether we're introverts or extroverts, whether we're busy or not, what our job is or whatever it is.

All of us are under the same command to love one another. Indeed, so serious is the lack of love that John makes it clear in this passage that if you're a Christian lacking love, you're in fact not a Christian, in effect.

You're a child of the devil, no less. Remember how chapter 3, verse 10, and that passage preceding tonight's finished. The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way.

All who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.

[6 : 46] You cannot get a more serious matter than that. There is no excuse for lack of love. Lack of love by a Christian for other Christians is a mark of the devil, not of God.

Two examples are given in this passage tonight, a negative one and a positive one. The negative one first is the example of Cain, son of Adam and Eve.

His story is told in Genesis chapter 4. In verse 12 we read here, we must not be like Cain, who was from the evil one, and murdered his brother.

And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Within the passage in Genesis chapter 4, after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden because of their own sin, we find that sin has spread.

Sin has spread to Cain, and indeed through the story of Genesis, to all humanity. Spread not only in breadth, but also in depth. And so whereas in Genesis chapter 3, Eve has to be talked into sinning by the devil, Genesis 4, God doesn't even, or can't even, talk Cain out of sinning.

[8 : 17] Each of Cain and Abel, the two brothers, have offered offerings to God. The text doesn't make it explicit why God favors Abel's, not Cain's, but the description of Abel's, that it comes from the fat portions, indicates that it's the best, whereas Cain just offered.

Not necessarily his best is probably the implication of that. In the letter to the Hebrews, there's a further comment about faith, and lack of faith on the part of Cain. Here we're also told that his deeds were evil.

But it's not just that his deeds were evil, or his lack of faith, or his lack of the best. As God warned him, anticipating what he would do, Cain's anger and envy bubbled over into murder.

He refused to heed God's warning. He refused to master sin lying at its gate, or his gate, ready in fact to master him as it did. What John is alerting us to here is that hatred is embryonic murder.

Cain went the step and killed his brother in the field. All hatred is the first step down that path. Indeed, as Jesus himself teaches in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5.

[9 : 44] But there's more to it than that in the Cain and Abel story, as alluded to by John in verse 12. Why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil, and his brother's righteous. Evil hates what is good.

It's astonishing. It's profound, though. And it's true. Evil hates what is good. Evil is not just sort of rejoicing in its own evil, but it actually hates what is good.

It's a total inversion and perversion of all the moral standards of God. Evil hates what is good. It's so blind to morality that it's topsy-turvy.

It's upside down. And Cain hated his brother, not because there was any bad thing in his brother Abel. Indeed, he hated him because of his own goodness, his faith, his righteousness, his generosity and offering the best of his flock, and so on.

And so he killed him. That is, Cain's evil hatred was totally, in a sense, unprovoked by anything in Abel. It's totally unjustifiable.

[11 : 00] There's nothing bad in Abel that has provoked or given any mitigating circumstance to the evil hatred, the lack of love demonstrated by Cain when he murdered Abel.

That's the connection into the next verse. Verse 14. Rather, verse 13. Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you.

Often commentators can't see a connection there, but that's really what's being said here. Cain's evil meant that he hated good. The readers of John's epistle are the objects of some disdain or possibly hatred, rejection by the false teachers and those who followed after them, as well as by the world outside the church at large.

And John is reminding them, don't be surprised because evil hates what is good. Don't think that the hatred that you're receiving from the world, which includes the false teachers who've gone out from your midst and those who are following their teaching, don't feel that somehow because you're receiving their hatred that somehow you've got it wrong.

Evil hates what is good. So don't be surprised, verse 13 is saying to us. And it's exactly the same connection that Jesus makes in the passage that Annette read a little bit of earlier from John chapter 15 as well.

[12 : 32] In John 15, in that upper room discourse, the night before the crucifixion, Jesus says in chapter 15, verse 12, this is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this to lay down one's life for one's friends.

And then he finishes that paragraph, I'm giving you these commands so that you may love one another. And the very next verse says, if the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.

The same connection between Christian mutual love and receiving the hatred of the world. And Jesus received the hatred of the world like Abel received the hatred of Cain.

And so for any Christian, as they practice love and what is right and good, we ought not be surprised if we receive the world's hostility, hatred, hatred, and even murder.

Are we much different from Cain? Maybe we don't go out into a field and deliberately and literally kill, murder, our sibling, although, if you're like me, there are probably times when you're a teenager that you wish that maybe you did that.

[13 : 49] But how do we react to good when others do or receive good? How do we react to our school friends when they get 99.9 in their TER or whatever it is?

And we do worse than they. How do we react to our school friends when they get into the course they want but we don't? How do we react to our colleagues when they get promoted and we don't?

Or they get chosen for a cushy conference in some glamorous part of the world and we don't? How do we react when our brother or sister gets a student exchange to somewhere nice like Nigeria or no, I mean Germany or something?

But we don't. How do we react when we're single and our best friend gets married? You see, so often when good happens to others whom we love, there's actually envy, sometimes hatred, hostility, sometimes broken relationships.

We may not take the steps down to picking up a knife or a gun but hatred is embryonic murder. We must be careful, you see, knowing that love rejoices in what is good unlike evil which hates what is good.

[15 : 12] it's a test of love. How much we rejoice in the good of others even if it means to some extent our own deprivation. How much we rejoice and love when others succeed but perhaps we don't.

John is reassuring his readers in saying don't be surprised that the world hates you. He's reassuring them because they are practicing love for each other. Yes, he's urging them and commanding them to keep on and perhaps deepen and extend their love for each other but as we keep seeing in this letter despite the high commands there's this high level of reassurance.

Don't be surprised he says in verse 13 is a reassuring thing to say. It alludes back to Jesus' words as Jesus copped the flack was put to death. Well, be reassured that your practice of love for each other shows in a sense that you're on the right track.

John is reassuring his readers that they are in a sense practicing what is good and right as we've seen last week and the last few Wednesday nights as well this theme of reassurance that they are children of God not of the devil that they are walking in the light not in the dark that they are loving and doing what is right and that explains the hostility that they are facing from the world around them.

Love is evidence for being Christian it's not the task that we've got to accomplish in order to be Christian there's never a gospel of works that we find in 1 John but rather we keep seeing this strong command to do what is right to be holy to adhere to the truth to love because that is evidence of a relationship begun by the grace of God.

[17 : 04] We see that alluded to again in the next verse 14 we know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another that is love is evidential not the cause of passing from death to life passing from death to life is in a sense saying the same as what was said at the beginning of the chapter see what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God not children of the devil the devil leads to death God leads to life we've passed from death to life by the action of God's love and grace is in effect what John's saying in verse 14 and we know that because we love one another and whoever does not love abides in death not in life and not in God and in this verse as we keep seeing in this letter the tenses of the verbs are important it's a present tense a continuous sense about the verb so it's in verse 14 we know that we have passed from death to life because we keep on loving one another not just love once in the past done forgotten but love that keeps on loving a continuous habitual practice of our life that's evidenced in the readers of this letter and John is reassuring them then of their status before God but whoever does not love that is whoever does not keep on practicing habitual love not referring to the person who might just from time to time slip up and lack in love we all fall short of that high love standard but rather those who never even strive for that standard who walk in lovelessness that's their habitual practice he says they abide in death verse 14

John sums up the negative example in the next verse all who hate keep on hating that is a brother or sister are murderers as I said hatred is embryonic murder indeed here we'd say hatred is in effect murder as Jesus taught and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them you see the murderer's action is to bring about death death then abides in him not eternal life death is associated with the devil and not with God there's very black and white associations through this letter the devil death hatred murder but on the other hand God and love and life when we run our marriage preparation group courses here at

Holy Trinity we have a number of people who do those courses or lead the courses and sessions in them I give one session to try and lead people into thinking about the gospel into thinking about God in the context of preparing for marriage and one of the things I begin in that session to do is to ask each individual there on a blank piece of paper to draw a symbol of love and perhaps some slogan you know the slogan for Toyota is oh what a feeling you know jumping up in the air all that sort of thing I notice in Europe the slogan is the car in front's a Toyota different slogan there probably they're not as exuberant as Australians you know oh what a feeling I always tell them they're not allowed when they draw this symbol of love they're not allowed to have a heart that's too easy they're not allowed to have intertwining rings or hands held together gradually as I get tougher I keep ruling out more and more things but of course if I didn't give any of those prohibitions hearts would be dominant holding hands intertwining rings but when I rule those things out you often get smiley faces always with a smile and happiness you know roses or other flowers if people can't draw very well chocolates nobody's drawn sex

I guess you wouldn't expect that at a church marriage preparation but I wouldn't mind betting that some people have that in mind even if they don't draw it but to be honest the usual sorts of things are you know two little people stick figures or whatever holding hands walking on a beach or a sunset or flowers it's all very romantic it's all very happy and so on I'm not a great romantic you might tell and it may be why I'm still single but to be honest behind most of those people and in saying this you've got to bear in mind that two thirds of these couples are not Christians behind it all they've got this romantic sometimes sexual, sensual, soppy, emotional sort of idea of love.

It's about the heart beating faster, it's about the blood pumping a little bit faster, it's about the emotions being heightened a bit, it's about sort of you know soft edge photography and all very romantic sort of stuff, it's about feeling good, it's about being loved, it's about falling in love or making love and that sort of love there's nothing necessarily wrong with it but in the end it's a bit ephemeral.

[22 : 38] That sort of love is provoked by something that the person regards as lovely, that is there's something in their fiancé that gives them warm gushy feelings and makes their heart beat a little bit faster.

Actually such ideas of love can be thinly disguised selfishness because lots of people actually like their heart beating a bit faster, they like the warm cuddly feelings, their romantic feelings.

I remember once interviewing a couple years and years and years ago, not here and he'd been married twice before, short marriages, he was in his 40s, I was in my 20s and she had been married for 20 something years, they'd already had a baby together this couple, she'd now left her husband and they wanted to get married.

And as I talked with them about their relationship thinking I feel very uncomfortable about this, I asked him because he struck me basically as a selfish pig, I asked him what is it, what is it that you do for her to show your love?

And quickly he answered me, everything I like doing she likes doing. And I thought you're a selfish pig. And so I said I wouldn't marry them.

[24 : 02] And he was very angry. Well I don't know what happened to that couple. You see sometimes love is just really an excuse of selfishness. And even in Christian circles sometimes it collapses into that and even sometimes when we think of God's love for us it collapses.

You know the Bible study group that says let's answer the question how do we know that God loves us? And someone says oh because when I think of Jesus my heart beats faster and I know his presence in me and I feel warm and tingly because I've got a relationship with Jesus.

Well that might be a good thing. But in the end it's collapsed the idea of love into something sentimental and gushy and a bit pukey in my opinion.

And we see it sometimes in the songs that we can sing modern Christian songs that some of us sort of call Jesus is my boyfriend type songs. You know his songs that talk about us loving Jesus or him loving us but his name's not even there you might as well go and sing it to Fred or Harry or Susan or somebody whoever your girlfriend boyfriend spouse is.

You see John wants us to be very clear here. He's talking about a specific love. love. He's not talking about gushy sexual sensual emotional heart quickening type of love in essence.

[25 : 26] He's talking about something much more objective. Much more significant than that. The model of love that he gives us which we as Christians ought to expect after all is striking and challenging.

for he says in verse 16 we know love by this. Not rings together not holding hands not kisses and smileys and hearts and chocolates and roses and all that sort of stuff.

We know love by this that he Jesus laid down his life for us. the good shepherd who out of love gives up his life for the sheep.

You see the symbol of love is the cross. There's no better symbol than the cross and thankfully when I have Christian couples doing this course more often than not they draw a cross.

The cross is the symbol of love. And notice the contrast between Cain you see if hatred is about taking life killing and putting to death love at its deepest is about giving life.

[26 : 44] It may mean death to self but it's about giving life for others. It's the complete opposite of what Cain did. Hate aims for death love aims for life.

Hate seeks to please the self love seeks to please the other even at great cost to the self. And in this laying down his life for us don't think that what he's referring to is just Jesus saying I love you so much I'm going to do this for you as though it's a sort of futile gesture of love.

You're sitting at the end of a pier on a bright sunny day. You might have heard this illustration. I've certainly used it before but it's an old one from James Denny a theologian as far as I can tell. The sun is out the birds are singing you're kicking your heels over the pier you're thinking this is just an idyllic situation and along comes somebody whom you know and they say to you I'm going to show you how much I love you I'm going to jump off this pier and drown.

it'd wreck your day. You wouldn't think at the end of the day gosh wasn't it great that that friend of mine showed me how much he or she loved me.

You wouldn't feel warm tingles inside. You'd be planning for a funeral and you'd think what a senseless waste of human life. See that's not Jesus dying on the cross.

[28 : 14] He's not on the cross there with his arms outstretched saying this is how much I love you. He's loving us by giving us some real tangible and eternal benefit.

You see the illustration of you on the pier is in the reality of Jesus on the cross. We're in the water not on the pier we're drowning and he jumps in to save us from drowning and in doing so he drowns saving us our life and then we would know that our friend really loved us and then at the end of the day we'd be full of thanks.

not saying what a stupid idiot to jump off a pier and Jesus' death is like that. Real love is not just some empty display of emotion or some super sacrificial but silly act.

love the real love of Jesus is for our benefit so that our sins are forgiven so that we're adopted into God's family so that we're acquitted before God on that judgment day so that we're welcomed into the portals of heaven for eternity so that we're reconciled to God and reconciled to each other so that we're made perfect and holy and blameless on the final day in the sight of God.

That's why Jesus died for us and that's what his death accomplished. That's real love. That's what John's referring to. Not just an empty display of a silly or stupid act but an act full of substantial and eternal benefit to those who are believers in Jesus Christ.

[29 : 50] As a result of that demonstration of love for our enormous benefit God John then says and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

Our death will never atone for another's sins but it doesn't need to because Jesus does. John here is not urging us to jump off piers as an expression of love on some stupid suicidal mission.

He's saying in effect our life is bought by God it belongs to him not us and we ought to be prepared to give it in a sense to him but for the benefit of others however that might occur.

few of us will ever actually give up our life for others. That is few of us will actually ever be in the position of facing a real option of doing that.

Maybe some of us here might end up being Christian martyrs in which case we in a sense may fulfil this that we lay down our lives for others.

[31 : 05] It may be even in Australia let alone overseas in our lifetimes. It may be that out of love for somebody we die whether we are rescuing them from a burning house or before a train or whatever it is.

Those sorts of things occasionally rarely do happen. It may be that as an act of love for somebody else we in effect lay down our life for others but such extremes are few and far between.

John's not expecting everyone here to go and find ways of putting themselves to death for the benefit of others. And we can sit here and idly speculate about whether we have significant enough love.

That is as we look around our fellow brothers and sisters and you think well if the house is burning down and one of you is caught in it am I really going to risk my life for you in the house? And we could think yes probably I might well do it.

There might be some here that we think yes definitely I would do it. But probably thankfully never be put to such a test. The next verse though anchors what verse 16 says in real life.

[32 : 11] So it's not just sort of an ideal extreme. You must lay down your life for others. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

You see laying down our life for another means in effect giving to those in greater need than ourselves of our time possessions or whatever.

Possessions in particular are referred to in this verse. Whoever has the world's goods, whoever has some material possession literally and sees someone in greater need than you, your love in a sense giving up your life.

Not that I collapse it just into acts of generosity but it's anchored in real daily practical living. That's the test of love. Not an idle speculation about whether you'll run into a burning house to save someone whom you may or may not know.

And it's a rhetorical question in verse 17 and the answer begged is it can't. That is how can God's love abide in someone who refuses help to someone in need? It can't.

[33 : 21] God's love can't be in such a person. What a striking thing to say. Again you see generosity to those in need is not some light or trivial matter.

It's a matter of fundamental importance as a demonstration of love. And if we with plenty withhold our help from others in need, God's love doesn't abide in us.

And if God's love doesn't abide in us, what does? Hatred, murder, we're children of the devil following the argument through of the previous verses.

See how serious then this social concern and generosity in self-giving is for Christians to fellow Christians. The context is brothers and sisters in Christ as you can see in verse 17.

It's within Christian fellowship not to deny our role in giving generously to people who are not Christians. There is a fundamental concern to give and be generous and look out for and help those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

[34 : 28] Well this is a very strong statement. It's a statement of action not of intention. Sometimes we think it's the thought that counts. Now I really do have strong thoughts for my fellow Christians who are suffering so badly in the Sudan.

My thoughts and prayers go out to them regularly. My wallet remains closed. But bring it closer to home. That's the context to which John writes.

Within our own Christian fellowship here at Holy Trinity or in your own fellowship for those who are from other places. How generous are you to those in greater need? Providing hospitality for those who are struggling to find enough money to pay rent for example.

Or in providing toys for children or clothes for the needy or food for those who are in need. How easy it is to have blind eyes, pocketed hands, tight fists and passing by on the other side.

And we might say yes I'm praying for you. I'm praying that God will give you a job. I'm praying that God you'll find some food. Idle words. That's what John is in effect saying at the end of tonight's passage.

[35 : 38] Verse 18. Little children let us love not in word or speech but in truth and in action. What a challenge this is to us.

You see we can't resort to the comfort of an idle speculation about saying would I actually give my life for somebody else? Burning house, train coming, whatever it is.

That's a cop out really. What about to those who are in daily need? And we let's face it have many of the world's possessions.

Most of us have comfortable houses, cars, plenty of food, an abundance of food, clothes that we never wear. But even in suburbs like Doncaster there are people in need and beyond.

This is challenging our motivation. It's demolishing our excuses. I'm too busy. No excuse. I've got more important things to do. No excuse.

[36 : 39] You see love for our fellow Christians is to influence our diaries and our wallets, our goods and our chattels. Love is to drive how we spend our time during the week.

It's to drive how we spend our time in church. It's to dominate our motivations for being involved. Not that we'll do jobs at church for the kudos that we'll get or the attention that we'll get, but we'll do jobs at church because we love and love deeply and we're generous.

Love opens our eyes, not closes them. It opens our wallets, not closes them. It opens the doors to our homes, not closes them. And Jesus' example of love on the cross to us, to all of us, takes away also our freedom of choice.

We have no room to say, no grounds to say, well, I'm already loving those people. I can't love these as well.

Our love is to be indiscriminate in a sense. We don't choose whom we love if we follow the example of Jesus. The false teachers of John's day that seem to be drawing some of his congregation away are often associated with a group called the Gnostics.

[38 : 02] They came into full flower in the next century and there's debate about how much in a sense incipient Gnosticism there was in the first century. But what they claimed that humans needed most was knowledge.

Gnostic is related to the Greek word for knowledge. The biggest problem you see for people is their ignorance, their lack of knowledge. Not so, says John.

The biggest problem for people is their rebellion against God manifest in lovelessness. You see, the issue is not an educational issue of accumulating knowledge.

It's a moral issue of lacking love. What is needed is not information, but reformation in our hearts and in our minds.

Pre-eminently, what is needed is love. For this is the message you've heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. And we know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.

[39 : 13] Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. Thank you.