

Love One Another - 1 John 3:11-24

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Location: St George's, Battery Point

Series: All You Need is Love 1 John

Texts: 1 John 3:11-24, Matthew 5:43-48, Genesis 4:1-16 (cf. Matthew 22:37-38, John 15:18-25, 14:14-16+16:23-26; Romans 13.8-10)

“Stupid. Pointless. Menacing. That's what I thought of Christians and their god Jesus ...”

So writes Rosaria Champagne Butterfield. Rosaria was a lesbian and a professor in English and women's studies at Syracuse University in the US.

“I cared about morality, justice, and compassion. ... I strove to stand with the disempowered. I valued morality. And I probably could have stomached Jesus and his band of warriors if it weren't for how other cultural forces buttressed the Christian Right. Pat Robertson's quip from the 1992 Republican National Convention pushed me over the edge: "Feminism," he sneered, "encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians.””

In 1997 she wrote an article eviscerating a Christian event that was held in her university. The article generated a lot of responses, for and against, but one stood out: a letter from Ken Smith, the pastor of a local church. Rather than mocking and hating on her, like the placards she had seen at Gay Pride marches, Ken's letter was kind and enquiring, and even invited her for dinner. She accepted and so began the most unlikely friendship with Ken and his wife Floy.

“They entered my world. They met my friends. We did book exchanges. We talked openly about sexuality and politics. They did not act as if such conversations were polluting them.”

Rosaria started reading the Bible. Her friends saw her life was changing.

“... the Bible got to be bigger inside me than I. It overflowed into my world. I fought against it with all my might. ... Then, one ordinary day, I came to Jesus, openhanded and naked. In this war of worldviews, Ken was there. Floy was there. The church that had been praying for me for years was there. Jesus triumphed.”¹

Do you ever wonder what Christianity looks like from the outside? The place of Christianity in Australian society has changed over the years, and sometimes in the church it can feel like people hate us. I remember coming out of a prayer meeting when I was at university and a young woman walking past screamed at me, “Get your rosaries off my ovaries!” which as far as slogans go was a great line, never mind the fact I wasn't Roman Catholic. Sometimes that hostility is well deserved. Sometimes it's from what people see in the public square rather than their experience of Christians face to face.

This is the 3rd in our series on 1 John. In our text today, John writes, in 3:13,

Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.

¹ Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, ‘My Trainwreck Conversion’, *Christianity Today*, January 2013
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/january-february/my-train-wreck-conversion.html>

Opposition is something we should expect as those who follow the crucified Messiah. After all Jesus says,

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. **19** If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. **20** Remember what I told you: “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.²

John writes to warn us to expect opposition, and how we’re to respond to it. What is his answer? Love. This is the heart and soul of how Christians are to live - to love your neighbour as yourself. Love is how we’re called to treat everyone, but that starts in the church, and so John picks up on Jesus’ command,

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.³

Reading this first letter of John, I’m convinced the ancient apostle wrote it at the end of his life, to convey the distilled essence of the Christian faith to his hearers and to us. John doesn’t just want us to know what Christians believe, but he also wants us to know how Christians are meant to live. In fact the two go hand in hand. In today’s text we get John’s most succinct summary of what being a Christian is all about, it’s there in 3.23:

And this is [God’s] command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.

There it is. Faith and Practise. This is the essence of the Christian faith - believing in the name of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, and loving one another.

We’ve spent time in the last few chapters exploring what it means to believe in Jesus. Today in chapter 3 verses 11-24, John’s main focus is on that second part, loving one another, just as Jesus has commanded us. John explores this theme in three parts. First, he contrasts love to hate in 3:11-15. Second, he examines what love looks like in 3:16-18. Whether we love one another is for John a key test of whether you’re a Christian or not. But he’s a great pastor, and so in the final section of our text, 3:19-24, he seeks to assure us of God’s love when we look at our failures to love one another. So let’s dive in.

Love Not Hate (3:11-15)

John writes in verse 11

... this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.

To help make the point, John turns to the archetypal opposite of love.

12 Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother’s were righteous.

² John 15:18-20

³ John 13:34-35

Jesus said that the entire Old Testament is summed up in the commands to love God and to love your neighbour.⁴ Cain follows his parents Adam and Eve in failing the first command, to love God, and this issues in a terrible breaking of the second command. Instead of loving his brother, he murdered him. While Cain is wrestling with that murderous envy at God accepting his brother's sacrifice and not his, God says to him:

Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door: it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.⁵

It's that spiritual battle that we're all in that John talks about in the previous chapter - against the world, the flesh and the devil. Rather than fighting, Cain opens the door to sin, and it seizes him and makes him his servant. He lures his brother out into the field and slays him. John says these actions demonstrated that Cain belonged to the evil one.

The writer and activist Elie Wiesel famously said, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference." He certainly touches on something true. Love does not neglect or ignore, it's actively engaged. But John here says something stronger. Hate is the opposite of love. Love seeks the welfare of the other, but hate, their destruction. John picks up on Jesus' own teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus goes beyond the external action, murder, to the motives of the heart, hate.⁶

Why does John highlight Jesus' command to love one another? Why not his command to love our neighbours, or even our enemies? Jesus said these too.⁷ I think because John knows that we learn to love other people, our neighbours and even our enemies, in the church. We get to build those muscles with our spiritual brothers and sisters, who are learning alongside us, so that we're equipped to use them when we go out into the world which doesn't live by the ethic of love. As one writer puts it, the church is a school of spiritual and moral formation.⁸

John continues

13 Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. **14** We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. **15** Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.

Again it's one of those binaries John loves. To obey Jesus' command to love one another means that you're walking in the way of life. To reject this and hate your brother is to turn towards death, not just theirs but yours as well. That is not to say that even murderers are beyond God's forgiveness. Christ's calls all people to turn to him in repentance and so find forgiveness. Rather, this is about a way of life. Hatred and destruction are the way of the evil one. Just like Cain.

⁴ Matthew 22:37-28

⁵ Genesis 4.6-7

⁶ Matthew 5:21-26

⁷ Matthew 22:37-39, 5:43-48

⁸ James Davidson Hunter, *To Change the World*, Oxford, 2010: 281-284

What love looks like (3:16-18)

What does love look like? Love has material content. It is not a vague goodwill. For the apostle Paul as for Jesus, loving your neighbour summarises the back half of the 10 commandments in our obligations towards each other.

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbour. [Surely a reference to Cain!] Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.⁹

Note the inclusion of “you shall not commit adultery”, that’s the summary of the Bible’s sexual ethic, and following this is part of loving your neighbour.

John however focuses on meeting the practical needs of others.

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

John has already spoken about how Jesus died for our sins. For this reason, he can now point to Jesus’ death as the example which we are to follow. He defines what love is - sacrificially giving of oneself for another. There may be times when we are called literally to sacrifice our lives for the sake of others. But John has more in mind the day to day dying to yourself and putting the needs of others before your own selfish desires. The example he picks is concrete and confronting.

¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

Let me say that it has been a joy for me to see people at St George’s doing just this! Seeing the needs of others, and seeking to meet them by generously sharing what God has given. Cooking meals, helping in the garden, helping people move and clean, visiting the sick, offering a bed to stay, sharing clothes are all just some of the things I’ve seen people do to love others at church. John says in verse 22, this pleases God. Of course we can’t all do everything, but the question is, are you willing? Are you on the look out for how you can love others? What are concrete things you can do this week to love others? Maybe it’s with your kids or grandkids or your parents or siblings. Maybe someone at church, or someone at work.

How well we love others is a great index of our spiritual health. Looked at from another way, loving others in practical ways is a terrific way to grow spiritually. It gets you out of your own head, gets you serving and focusing on others. And loving others doesn’t stop at the doors of the church. Yes we learn how to do it here, but we’re called to take that attitude of love and service out into the world.

⁹ Romans 13.8-10

What's more, you never know what impact your gift of practical love will have. It may transform someone's life. Just look at Rosaria Butterfield. We have a great opportunity as a church to love our neighbours with Pancakes coming up in Feb. More about that later in the service.

Assurance of God's love (3:19-24)

John is a great pastor. We're called to love one another. But sometimes that is really hard. We can struggle not to hate those who have wronged us, even though we know we're called to love. We can turn a blind eye from those in need because it's too costly, because they make us uncomfortable. We may try and fail to love others. What then? We can find ourselves overwhelmed with a sense of guilt at our failures, on top of the wounds we've received. We can wonder if God still loves us. Fears and doubts assail us. What are we to do? John tells us in verse 19.

This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: **20** If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

What John is saying is this. Yes, as we love others that is great evidence that we belong to God and that the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives. But that is not where we should look to for our assurance. We are to look to God, and his Son Jesus. It is in his presence that our hearts find rest. The promise that God knows everything is paradoxically reassuring. Yes, he knows our sin and failure, even better than we do! It is no surprise to him. But, the reassurance comes because knowing this, he nevertheless has brought us into his family and lavished his love upon us. If our hearts condemn us, he is greater than our hearts. Our assurance does not depend upon our experience or feelings - it rests upon his greatness. And that is most clearly seen in Jesus' death for us. As John will go on to say,

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.¹⁰

John's final point is that we don't in fact love one another in our own strength. It's not a moral achievement in which we boast. Rather it is in fact by participating in God's love that we are empowered to love, as we live in him and he lives in us.

24 The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

Therefore, we pray and ask God to empower us to love, even when it's hard.

So, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God."¹¹

¹⁰ 1 John 4.10

¹¹ 1 John 4.7