

Series: 1 John

Title: Real Love - Part 1

Text: 1 John 3:11-14

Date: February 14, 2021

Verse 11

In verse 11, John reminded his readers of the primacy of love in the Christian faith. Considering the division being sown by some within the church (1 John 2:9 and 19), such a reminder was necessary. To instruct his hearers, John hearkened back to the teaching of Jesus, saying, “For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another.” The word translated “beginning” was an important one in John’s writings. He used it in John 1:1-2, 2:11; 1 John 1:1, 2:7, 2:13, 2:14, 2:24, and 3:8; 2 John 5-6. The word was used in the ancient world to refer to the start of a thing. One has said, “When it refers to time, it means the beginning, commencement, relative to an event or situation.”¹ As used by John, the term was often meant to convey the initial teachings of the Christian message. He frequently employed it to combat false teachers who promoted an altered form of Christian doctrine. Their teaching was new; his teaching was based on what had been proclaimed from the beginning.

In essence, John used what we would call an *a priori* argument. He liked to appeal to previously revealed truth in order to provide a rebuttal to his opponents. Examples of this are seen in his words from 1 John 1:1, 2:7, and 2:24. Such was John’s approach in our current verse. He called his readers’ attention to the words of Jesus from John 15:12 — “This is my command: Love one another as I have loved you.”

The person and teaching of Jesus were John’s guiding lights. His approach was far different than the false teachers of Asia Minor. Their claims were largely based on experience and emotion. John based his ministry on divine revelation. We can learn a lesson from the apostle. Modern society mostly devalues the teaching of Christ. Truth is often regarded as relative at best, and non-existent at worst. The pull of postmodern philosophy tempts Christians to doubt the sufficiency of Scripture. John provided a model for believers of all generations. The revealed Word of God should be the standard for faith and practice.

John went back to the beginning. Because love was important to Jesus, John maintained that it should have been important for His readers. Jesus’ teaching, as recorded in the New Testament, proved that love should be a priority for every believer. In Matthew’s gospel, our Lord promoted it as the most important of all of God’s commands (Matthew 22:37-40). The instruction of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) was to be the guiding principle for His disciples. In learning to love, they would naturally fulfill all of God’s Law (Matthew 22:40). Such is the reason Jesus repeatedly said, “This is what I command you: Love one another” (John 15:17).

In appealing to his readers to love as Jesus had commanded, John used present tense verbiage. His words described a continual attitude of love. One has said he called for “habitual love.”² Some within first-century Asia Minor were falling short in this regard. Instead of exhibiting a pattern of love, they were living a lifestyle was marked by hateful, spiteful, and malicious mistreatment of others (1 John 2:9 and 4:11). John wanted his readers to remember the words of Jesus and realize that such a lifestyle was far from what God desired. His words were intended to bring conviction and repentance.

If we are not vigilant, our lives can sometimes start to mirror the unloving practices of the false teachers in Asia Minor. When we do, a callousness towards others will replace the affectionate regard the Lord desires. May the Lord give us grace to remember the words of Jesus. If we set our souls on Him, His Holy Spirit can manifest His love in our lives (Romans 5:5

¹ Zodhiates, 260-261.

² Weust, [CD-Rom].

and Galatians 5:22). As Christian charity grows, God's people will be edified and encouraged by us.

Verse 12

Verse 11 contained a New Testament reference to support John's teaching on love. Verse 12 shared an Old Testament one. It said, "unlike Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous" (1 John 3:12). Jesus showed John's readers what to do; Cain showed them what not to do. The latter's bloody history was recorded in Genesis 4:1-8. Out of envy toward his brother, the man committed the first murder in human history.

John described the incident in strong terms. The word translated "murder" was one used in classical Greek literature to poetry one slaughtering an animal by cutting its throat.³ It meant "to butcher."⁴ As used by John, the word portrayed a "violent killing."⁵ The apostle used graphic language in order to underscore the deep and depraved nature of Cain's actions. Hatred in the heart of man, when left unchecked, can lead one to commit great unrighteousness.

According to John, Cain's horrific sin found its root in the fact that he "was of the evil one." John's reference was undoubtedly an allusion to Satan. When one reads between the line of the Genesis account, it seems demonic activity motivated Cain to lash out against his brother. Remember Genesis 3:15. When the Lord meted out consequences for Adam and Eve's sin, He told Satan, "I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). Satan heard those words, and he remembered them. He knew the woman would give birth to someone who would bring about his downfall.

We know the Lord's pronouncement referred to Jesus, one who would be born hundreds of years later through the seed of David. Satan initially wasn't aware of all of the details related to the incarnation. He only knew someone born of woman would pose a threat; thus, when Cain and Able were born, he began to scheme. Able seemed like the more righteous one (Genesis 4:4), so Satan likely regarded him as being more dangerous. Through his powerful schemes, he prompted Cain to murder the more righteous one of the two brothers. His end goal was to outmaneuver God's pronouncement in Genesis 3:15.

John used Cain as an example for his readers. He wanted them to know that all unloving behavior comes from Satan. The schemes and strategies of the evil one prompt men and women to live for "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride in one's possessions" (1 John 2:16). When one becomes dominated by such things, a disregard for others will soon follow. In the end, one can follow a lack of love all the way back to the Garden of Eden and find it resting in Satan's bosom. God deals in love (1 John 4:8); Satan deals in hate. Those who faithfully follow the Lord will show love, those who don't will not.

John made his readers aware of the spiritual dimension of Cain's sin, but also wanted them to see the human side of it. Concerning Cain's murder of Able, John asked, "And why did he murder him?" (1 John 3:12). John answered his own question, saying, "Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous" (1 John 3:12). Through his words, John showed the human motive that drove Cain's behavior. Because Cain was jealous of Able's righteous behavior, he sought to kill him. He held animosity in his heart, because his brother was faithful to the Lord. The author of Hebrews gave testimony to Able's righteous behavior: "By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was approved as a righteous man, because God approved his gifts, and even though he is dead, he still speaks through his faith" (Hebrews 11:4).

³ Weust, [CD-Rom].

⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 596.

⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 596.

Verse 13

John's reference to Cain may seem like a mere off-the-cuff reference to an Old Testament scriptural reference. A careful consideration of the background of John's letter proves otherwise. John cited the story of Cain and Abel to his readers for a reason. He explained why in verse 13, saying, "Do not be surprised, brothers and sisters, if the world hates you" (1 John 3:13). The word rendered "world" is the same one that appeared back in 1 John 2:16. It referred to the system of fallen humanity that rested under the control of Satan (1 John 5:19). That system actively opposed John's readers via the philosophies of the Gnostic heretics.

John didn't want his readers to be taken off guard by such opposition. The word translated "surprised" spoke of a "continuous feeling stirred up by the whole temper of man."⁶ John used a present imperative in order to command his readers to stop an action in progress.⁷ Apparently, some of John's readers were in the process of fretting. The criticism of the Gnostics was getting to them.

John wanted the real believers to take heart. Abel was an example for them. They needed to consider the case of humanity's first two brothers and find comfort for their souls. Though they were being hotly opposed, they needed to remember that their opponents were like Cain — their works were evil (1 John 3:12). They were being opposed, as Able was opposed, on account of their righteousness. Such a reminder was intended to comfort true believers and energize them to further faithfulness.

The real Christians amongst John's readership needed to remember Jesus' words — "If the world hates you, understand that it hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18). Darkness always hates the light, and unrighteousness normally despises righteousness. Believers shouldn't be surprised when they face blowback from unredeemed humanity. John Calvin once said, "We must learn to endure patiently when the world hates us gratuitously."

Verse 14

Though the heretics exhibited Cain-like, unloving behavior, the real believers were marked by love. In 1 John 3:14, John said, "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers and sisters. The one who does not love remains in death." The word translated "we" appeared in the emphatic position of the original language. John placed stress on the first-person, plural pronoun to make it clear he was talking about the true believers of Asia Minor.

The apostle wanted the real Christians to have confidence concerning their salvation. Such assurance was a theme of his letter (1 John 5:13). He knew his readers needed encouragement, because the Gnostics were sowing seeds of doubt. To be assured, the true believers only needed to look to the work of God's love in their hearts. John said such love was evidence that one had "passed from death to life." John's language was language Jesus used to refer to salvation. In John 5:24, our Lord said, "Truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not come under judgment but has passed from death to life."

John borrowed Jesus' terminology to speak of salvation. In doing so, he used a perfect-tense verb. His verbiage was intended to depict the permanence of salvation.⁸ Christians love, because an everlasting change has been wrought in their hearts. Though they were once subjects of spiritual "death," like all of unredeemed humanity (Romans 6:23 and Ephesians 2:1-3), they became the recipients of "life" through the work of Christ (John 3:36, 5:24, and 14:6). Their newfound spiritual life compelled them to "love" the "brothers and sisters." With the indwelling of the Spirit at salvation, they received a capacity to love in an otherworldly

⁶ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 596.

⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 596.

⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 596.

fashion (Romans 5:5 and Galatians 5:22). Though the Gnostics casted aspersions on the genuineness of their faith, they could be assured because of the proof of love in their lives.

Ironically, they were the very ones who questioned the salvation of the true Christians were the ones who had a questionable profession. John said, "The one who does not love remains in death." His words referred to an ongoing pattern of unloving behavior. John didn't mean to say one isolated unloving act could disqualify one from salvation. He meant to rebuke the false professors. Their consistent lack of love was evidence they weren't true Christians. People who have hate as a habit of life demonstrate they've never been changed by the grace of God.

True converts may slip up and stumble at times. They may not always be as loving as they should be, but they will have love as an overarching theme for their lives. Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). John shared such truth to encourage the true believers who were being overwhelmed and unjustly criticized by unloving false believers.