

Series: 1 John

Title: Real Love - Part 2

Text: 1 John 3:15-18

Date: May 9, 2021

Verse 15

In verse 15, John continued his discussion on Christian love by talking about the way in which some lived lives of hate. He said, "Everyone who hates his brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him" (1 John 3:15). At first glance, the apostles words may have seemed a bit harsh. Wasn't it extreme to label a hateful person a "murderer"? A closer examination of John's words reveal the reasoning behind his assertion.

The word translated "hates" in verse 15 appeared in the present tense of the original language. John's intent was to speak of a person who lived with ongoing hate in his or her heart. He meant to portray those within Asia Minor who were fully given over to unloving behavior.

Everyone will struggle with bitterness and resentment from time to time. Even the most faithful of Christians may exhibit unloving behavior. From reading Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we find that believers can have struggles with interrelation sins that involve things like anger and a lack of forgiveness (Ephesians 4:1-6 and 25-29). No one is immune to challenges in these areas. One has correctly noted, "It is an illusion to believe that a real Christian is incapable of hatred."¹

John was not talking about the common, run-of-the-mill experiences most believers have. He wasn't concerned with momentary lapses into unloving behavior. When he spoke of "everyone who hates," he referred to a lifestyle of hate. Some within the churches of Asia Minor were chronic bullies. They continually manipulated and mistreated others.

John wanted the church to know that such habitual hate was tantamount to murder. His words evoked memories of the illustration he used a few minutes earlier (1 John 3:12). It may have seemed extreme to call the heretics of Asia Minor "murderers," but the example of Cain supported John's comparison. Cain's sin started in his heart. It started with his animosity toward his brother. Remember the way in which the Lord told him, "Sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you but you must rule over it" (Genesis 4:7). Cain killed Abel because he couldn't control the sin in his heart. His hatred made him into a murderer.

Jesus Himself equated hate with murder. In the Sermon on the Mount, He said, "You have heard that it was said to our ancestors, Do not murder, and whoever murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment" (Matthew 5:21-22). Left unchecked, will inevitably lead to murder. For this reason, hatred can be regarded as murder in the mind. It is the "spiritual equivalent of murder."²

John wanted his readers to know that those who were engaging in continual patterns of such hate were not real believers. He said, "No murderer has eternal life residing in him" (1 John 3:15). His words fit within the overall theme of chapter 3. Back in 3:2, he began a discussion in which he contrasted the true children of God with those who were counterfeit. In 3:6 and 8, he told his readers that continual sinners were not of God. Our current passage focused on one of the most prevalent sins amongst the sinners in Asia Minor — hateful behavior. In the previous verse (3:14), John said true believers are marked by love. In our current verse (3:15), John proposed that continual hate reveals one is not really converted.

The manipulative and mean heretics amongst John's readers did not have "eternal life" residing in them. They were not saved. Their profession of faith was false. They lacked the eternal life of Jesus (John 17:3 and 1 John 1:2). True Christians needed to be wise and

¹ Walvoord and Zuck, 896.

² Walvoord and Zuck, 896.

discerning. Jesus' words were true — “You'll recognize them by their fruit” (Matthew 7:20). One has rightly said, “Both the fruit and the root” of ongoing hate “reveal the unregenerate nature of such a person.”³

Verse 16

To help his readers understand the true nature of Christian love, John provided an example in verse 16. He said, “This is how we have come to know love: He laid down his life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters” (1 John 3:16). The word translated “know” doesn't refer to a personal experience of one being a benefactor of God's love, though Christians have had such an experience. Instead, John meant to speak of the act of knowing in an educational sense. In other words, John meant to say one can learn how to love by looking at Jesus.

Our Lord provided the ultimate example of love. By looking at Him, we can understand how we are to love to others. He is the ultimate schoolmaster when it comes to love, because He loved like no other. In John 15:13, Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends.” Christ gave His life in order to provide substitutionary atonement for sin (John 10:11 and 15, 15:13; Romans 5:8). However, His love did more than purchase our redemption. It also provided us with a pattern of how we are to love.

Plain and simple, Christ's sacrifice taught that selfless sacrifice is the path to loving others. John said, because of what Jesus did, we “should also lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters” (1 John 3:16). The word translated “should” conveyed the idea of moral obligation.⁴ John meant to say that his readers were under moral obligation to exhibit selfless, sacrificial love to one another. In fact, the original language contained emphatic language.⁵

It is worth noting that John's instruction was not meant to be taken literally. Though there may be times in which a Christian is called to die on behalf of another, John did not have such sacrifice in mind. His intent was to encourage selflessness and service amongst the church. A focus on others is the key to Christian love.

The New Testament consistently upholds this reality. Jesus said, “Whatever you want others to do for you, do also the same for them” (Matthew 7:12). In the Great Commandment, He said, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). Paul encouraged a similar type of charity: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). An others-focus, as opposed to a self-focus, is the essence of Christian love. The Holy Spirit can produce such affectionate regard in one's heart (Romans 5:5). The false professors of Asia Minor knew nothing of such a frame of mind. They were obsessed with their own desires (1 John 2:16).

Verse 17

After describing the nature of Christian love in verse 16, John encouraged a practical display of the virtue in verse 17. He said, “If anyone has this world's goods and sees a fellow believer in need but withholds compassion from him—how does God's love reside in him?” (1 John 3:17). The word translated “need” spoke of one who lacked food for sustenance.⁶ Such a person lacked in such a way that his or her livelihood was threatened. It seems there were some legitimately poor people in the churches of Asia Minor. Such persons undoubtedly needed assistance from their fellow believers.

However, it seems some were withholding help. John likely had the heretics in mind. Perhaps he had heard they were unwilling to give assistance to those in need. There are times

³ Phillips, 109.

⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 596.

⁵ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

in which charity should be withheld from members who do not embrace responsibility for their own condition. It seems the early church struggled with freeloaders at times. That's why Paul told the Thessalonians, "In fact, when we were with you, this is what we commanded you: 'If anyone isn't willing to work, he should not eat.'" For we hear that there are some among you who are idle. They are not busy but busybodies" (2 Thessalonians 3:11-12). Though the church shouldn't give aid to everyone, it should be ready to help those who genuinely need it. Such was John's point in our verse.

Since the outset of the Christian movement, the church had helped people with the basic necessities of life (Acts 2:45 and 6:1). To do otherwise was to go against the teaching of Christ. John marveled at the callousness of some in Asia Minor. He called into question whether or not "God's love" resided in a person who was unwilling to help a destitute brother or sister in need of food. The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit brings the love of God into one's soul (Romans 5:5 and Galatians 5:22). As a result, those who are unwilling to help fellow Christians with the basic necessities of life give evidence they don't have God's Spirit within them.

Verse 18

In verse 18, John gave a simple encouragement for his readers to love one another. He said, "Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth" (1 John 3:18). From reading between the lines of John's words, it seems there was a problem with disingenuous displays of love in Asia Minor. Some didn't love sincerely. Supposed Christian charity involved little more than feigned friendliness.

Many loved "in word or speech." That is, they talked about love. Sermons were preached on the subject, and church members exchanged customary, cordial greetings (2 Corinthians 13:12). Despite shows of surface-level hospitality, true love was absent. This was evidenced by the fact that some were unwilling to help destitute members within the church.

Some within the church needed to learn to "be doers of the word and not hearers only" (James 1:22). John said they needed to love "in action and in truth." The word "action" indicated some needed to produce the good works that flow from real faith (Ephesians 2:10). The word "truth" revealed some were insincere in their displays of affection. Though they may have greeted others with a holy kiss and said, "I love you," their actions were not sincere. They were not truthful in the profession of Christian love. Such individuals needed to turn from a self-focused form of living. They needed to learn to live by the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40). The words of Paul had meaning for the churches of Asia Minor — "The whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself" (Galatians 5:14).