

Laying Down One's Life

1 John 3:11-24

April 22, 2018

Last week we talked about God's great love for us. Today, we're going to talk about what it means for us to love one another. John puts a strong emphasis on love. Can you guess how many times John uses some form of the word "love" in his letter, 1 John? Let me show you...

1 John 2:5 But if anyone obeys his word, **love** for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: 1 John 2:10 Anyone who **loves** their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. 1 John 2:15 Do not **love** the world or anything in the world. If anyone **loves** the world, **love** for the Father is not in them. 1 John 3:1 See what great **love** the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 1 John 3:10 This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not **love** their brother and sister. 1 John 3:11 For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should **love** one another. 1 John 3:14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we **love** each other. Anyone who does not **love** remains in death. 1 John 3:16 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. 1 John 3:17 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? 1 John 3:18 Dear children, let us not **love** with words or speech but with actions and in truth. 1 John 3:23 And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to **love** one another as he commanded us. 1 John 4:7 Dear friends, let us **love** one another, for **love** comes from God. Everyone who **loves** has been born of God and knows God. 1 John 4:8 Whoever does not **love** does not know God, because God is **love**. 1 John 4:9 This is how God showed his **love** among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 1 John 4:10 This is **love**: not that we **loved** God, but that he **loved** us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 1 John 4:11 Dear friends, since God so **loved** us, we also ought to **love** one another. 1 John 4:12 No one has ever seen God; but if we **love** one another, God lives in us and his **love** is made complete in us. 1 John 4:16 And so we know and rely on the **love** God has for us. God is **love**. Whoever lives in **love** lives in God, and God in them. 1 John 4:17 This is how **love** is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. 1 John 4:18 There is no fear in **love**. But perfect **love** drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in **love**. 1 John 4:19 We **love** because he first **loved** us. 1 John 4:20 Whoever claims to **love** God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not **love** their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot **love** God, whom they have not seen. 1 John 4:21 And he has given us this command: Anyone who **loves** God must also **love** their brother and sister. 1 John 5:1 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who **loves** the father **loves** his child as well. 1 John 5:2 This is how we know that we **love** the children of God: by **loving** God and carrying out his commands. 1 John 5:3 In fact, this is **love** for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.

By my count, the Apostle John uses some form of the word "love" 46 different times!¹ It's been said "Repetition is the mother of learning."² However, I'm not sure that this is so much a didactic method for John, as it is a burden on his heart. John is known as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Having been so well loved himself, John had learned to love others well. He doesn't want any Christ-followers to miss this key distinctive of the Christian faith.³ John begins our section of verses today

¹ Next month, when we get further into 1 John chapter 4, John will talk about love some more. In fact, he mentions love 27 times in that chapter alone! So, I'm warning you now, we'll need to talk about this again. But, it's John's fault. It's almost as though he is trying to make a point by repeating it over and over and over again. John keeps building this upward spiral, repeating certain key themes throughout his letter. Love is certainly one of those themes. He uses the exact phrase "love one another" 5 times in a row in chapters 3 and 4.

² "Repetitio est mater studiorum"

³ This evidence of the power of God was something he deeply desired for his bro/sis in Christ. John 13:23 says, "One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him." Learn more in the *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, 2015, footnote on p. 2182.

with **1. The reminder to love one another.** Note the emphasis here on ONE ANOTHER in 1 John 3:11, “For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.” This is not to say that loving other people in general isn’t important. But the emphasis here is on loving “one another.” We are given a chilling contrast to loving one another in 1 John 3:12, “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.” The evil actions of Cain revealed a heart filled with hatred and death. Back in Gen. 4:4-5 we learn that, “...The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.” The LORD urges Cain to do what is right and then he would be accepted. But sin takes hold of Cain and he turns around and murders his brother, Abel.⁴ Compared to Cain, all of us are doing pretty well I guess. I’m sure glad that I’m not like Cain! It’s interesting however, to note how John’s thoughts progress.

1 John 3:15 says, “Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.” The Bible equates hatred with murder; it doesn’t let us off so easily. You might be thinking, “Now, wait a second. There’s a HUGE difference between actually murdering someone, and just hating someone.” But listen to those words again, “JUST hating someone.” It’s a mistake for us to consider “hating someone” as JUST a little thing. Perhaps there are times when we are more like Cain than we might like to admit. Back in 1 John 2:9 we learned that, “Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness.” Hatred may be part of life for those who have not yet met Christ. But for those of us who are in Christ, hatred is not an acceptable attitude.⁵ A hateful attitude, will lead to hateful actions. A loving attitude will lead to loving actions.⁶ But what do we mean by loving actions? Practically speaking, does that mean that we give each other a lot of hugs? That we say “I love you,” every time we say goodbye? Or, does “loving one another” mean something more? Let’s talk about...

2. The definition of loving one another. I’m a child of the 80s and the 80s were loaded with LOTS of classic love songs. One of the more popular ones for me was a song by the band Foreigner.⁷ “I want to know what love is” is one of those songs we might crank up on our car stereo and sing at the top of our lungs, as long as no one is listening. Or, possibly if we are on a road trip with our family or some close friends! This song was released way back in 1984, 32 years ago. But, it still keeps hanging on. In fact, just last year, this song was featured on The Voice. It was sung by a young woman named Chloe Kohanski. She sang it beautifully in the semifinals. You can listen to it at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1p8EJSnwMA> No matter whose voice sings it, this song’s lasting popularity demonstrates the pressing human desire to know and feel what love is. This song cries out for the answer we find in 1 John 3:16, “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.”⁸ Our definition for loving one another is this: Jesus Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. And now, we ought to lay down our lives for one another. Some of us may be thinking, “hold on a second here: isn’t that Jesus’ job? Isn’t this going a bit overboard? I just wanted to sing a few songs, hear a good sermon and head home until next week. This is more than I signed up for.” I guess we could read the verse over again and maybe find a loophole. It seems pretty obvious though, there’s a contrast in our passage today. Don’t be like Cain in v. 12. Be like Jesus in v. 16.

⁴ Consider John 8:31-47.

⁵ “In the Bible hatred and love... are not primarily emotions but attitudes expressed in actions.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 2127.

⁶ Hate is equated with murder. With someone who remains spiritually dead. With someone who has not been born again and doesn’t have eternal life residing within them. This same idea is found in Matthew 5, in Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount. Jesus talks about not only being judged for murder but also being judged if we remain angry with a bro/sis in Christ. Matthew 5:23-24 challenges us to reconcile, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.” Therefore, loving one another has a bearing on our readiness to offer our worship to God.

⁷ Songwriter Larry Johnson. © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC.

⁸ Consider John 10:11 & 13:1 & 15:12-13.

When I think of laying down one's life for others, of course I think of Jesus' death on the cross. But I also think of people like the brave men and women who serve in our armed forces. They are willing to lay down their lives for others.⁹ Laying down one's life causes me to think of something heroic and grand, something worthy of great honor and celebration. But, that's not the application that John goes with here. I'll have to admit, I wasn't at all expecting what John writes next. 1 John 3:17-18 goes on to say, "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? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." Wow! John has suddenly made "laying down one's life" extremely practical for every one of us. We don't just need to be available in case there's some major threat. John gives us a "simple," daily, doable kind of thing. And perhaps that's what makes it so challenging.

I once heard a joke about 2 farmers. One farmer goes over to the other farmer's house to ask him a question: "Hey Farmer John, we've been friends for over 30 years now and we've been good neighbors that entire time, haven't we?" Farmer John replies, "well, yeah, of course we have!" The other farmer then says, "So, if I needed a tractor and you had 2 tractors, you'd let me have 1, wouldn't you?" Farmer John replies, "well, yeah, of course I would." The other farmer then says, "So, if I needed a horse and you had 2 horses, you'd let me have 1, wouldn't you?" Farmer John hesitates, then hems and haws a while. The other farmer says, "well, why are you so hesitant? Didn't you just say that if I needed a tractor and you had 2 tractors, that you'd let me have 1?" Farmer John replies, "well yeah, but I don't have 2 tractors." (You see, he had 2 horses, and that made the question a lot harder to answer.)

1 John 3:18, "Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."¹⁰ Loving one another is not just limited to sharing our material possessions though. Loving one another is about love in action. Actions like watching someone else's kids, helping them with their yard work or a home project. Actions like giving them a ride to their medical appointment or just giving them a call or stopping by because we know they're lonely. This is love in action.¹¹ The fact is, in modern America, we sometimes we try to get ourselves off the hook by just writing a check. Being part of a real family isn't that simple or easy though. It demands our time, our blood/sweat/tears. There's a beautiful picture of this in 1 Thessalonians 2:8 where the Apostle Paul writes to his brothers and sisters in Christ in Thessalonica, "...we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well."

Admittedly, there's a little bit of risk to this. Genuine relationships have a certain measure of vulnerability. So, we need to know, going into this, that we might get hurt from time to time. But, can you imagine if everyone in our church was willing to genuinely lay down their lives for one another? Just consider the strength and unity of that kind of mutual love! It's easier perhaps, to think of laying down our lives for a very close friend or for our spouse or our children. But, using Jesus' example, John challenges these brothers and sisters in Christ to deepen their commitment to one another. As it turns out, Christian fellowship may be something we've been taking too lightly. It's more than sharing a cup of coffee. It's sacrificially laying down my life, my own priorities and finances and comfort. That's not something we tend to do for just anyone. That's something we tend to reserve for family. But, isn't that what we are; a Christian family of brothers and sisters in Christ?¹²

⁹ I also think of the body guards in the secret service. They take an oath to give their lives in protection of our president. Or, perhaps the brave firefighters and rescue workers in the 911 tragedy. Brave men and women who ran toward the burning buildings and rubble while others ran away. They laid down their lives.

¹⁰ This echoes what we hear about faith/deeds in James 2:14-17, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." James/John agree: faith in action is love in action.

¹¹ Romans 12:15 says that we mourn with those who mourn and we weep with those who weep.

¹² John defines loving one another as "laying down one's life." It's love in action, not just hollow words. "Love can be defined as "denial of self for another's gain." Glenn W. Barker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 12*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1981, p. 336. This agrees with Luke 9:23, "Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." Our love for one another, in the body of CHRIST, is an overflow from our love for Christ Himself. Therefore, where we limit or fail to love a bro/sis in Christ, we limit and fail to love our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 John 3:17 points out: if we have no pity on those in need, how can the love of God be in us? (Consider also Deuteronomy 15:7-11.) If God's love is truly within us, then there should be an overflow.

Of course, one of the things this made me think of is our church's benevolence fund. Many of us give to this fund. Although all of these gifts and the recipients are anonymous, our financial records show that in the past 5 years, our church has been able to distribute over \$69,000 to people in need. That's money that no one was forced to give.¹³ But, it's money we are glad to give, because it goes to help our bros/sis in Christ. I just want to say: Way to go Efree Bemidji! This is a great way for us to love one another!¹⁴ Interestingly, John mentions a blessing that comes, from loving with actions and in truth. Here's what that blessing is: confidence before God. Our hearts can rest in God's presence because we choose to do what pleases Him.¹⁵ 1 John 3:19-22 tells us, "This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him."¹⁶ In other words, acts of love toward our fellow believers show that we belong to the truth. Our hearts will either be at rest, because we loved with actions and in truth. Or, our hearts will condemn us, because God sees our hearts and our lack of pity and generosity.¹⁷ Keeping God's commands and doing what pleases Him gives us confidence before God.

One day a dad took his 2 little kids to the mall with him. Every year, the mall would sponsor a little petting zoo. They'd set it up for the kids to enjoy all kinds of rabbits, hamsters, baby goats, and so on. It was basically a bit of a gimmick to get parents to come and shop while their children were being safely monitored. The dad knew that it would be safe to drop them off there, while he went shopping for a new drill that was on sale. As soon as they entered the mall, you could hear AND smell the animals. His 2 kids almost pulled his arms out of their sockets: "Daddy, can we go? Can we go!" He gave them each their customary dollar and they bolted straight for the line. The dad went to the department store and bought his new drill. Then, he headed back to the petting zoo to check on his kids. His daughter Helen (8 years old) was standing outside the fence, just watching the animals. His son Brandon (5 years old) was inside the fence having a blast petting a little Shetland pony they were featuring that year. The dad was surprised Helen wasn't in there too, she absolutely loved horses! He walked up beside his daughter and asked her, "Helen, Sweetheart, why aren't you inside with your brother, petting the animals?" Helen turned her tear-filled eyes toward her dad and explained, "it costs more money this year daddy. It costs \$2 this year and we each only had \$1. So, I gave Brandon my dollar." The dad nodded his head as the realization came to him. Before he could do what he wanted to do, his daughter added something beautiful, "we gotta remember our family motto daddy: 'love is action!'" Now, no one loves cuddly little furry creatures more than Helen. But, she'd picked up on something her parents had been teaching her and modeling for her for years. So, as difficult as it was for this dad, he let those other \$2 burn a hole in his pocket. He just stood there next to his daughter, both of them with tears in their eyes now, watching Brandon have great time. A little while later, the three of them went home together, all of them very pleased.

You see, laying down our lives for one another is not just about sharing because we have extra. Loving one another is about sacrifice. It's about choosing sometimes, to go without, so that someone else doesn't have to.

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on April 22, 2018 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson*

¹³ Consider John 10:17-18.

¹⁴ Not only is this a beautiful way to live our lives together in Christ, but it's a way to honor God, by obeying His command. A few verses later, 1 John 3:23 says, "And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us." This pairing surprises me a little bit. It probably shouldn't, but I admit, it does. Right here, side by side, John links these 2 commands: 1. Believe in Jesus. 2. Love one another. These don't seem equal or even, or in any way, comparable. But, there they sit, in unison with each other. That's something for us to ponder.

¹⁵ We talked about this last Sunday in 1 John 2:28, "And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming."

¹⁶ Consider 2 Thessalonians 3:13.

¹⁷ See 1 John 3:17.