

**“Real Jesus for Real Selflessness”****February 18, 2018**

1 John 2:28-3:10

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Last week we looked at the call to understand what Jesus came to do. He came to take away sins and to destroy the works of the devil. He has done this work for his people, for those who place their trust in his name.

We are called to Remember who we are and in that new life, LOVE one another. It is this love that John turns us to this morning.

<sup>11</sup> For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. <sup>12</sup> We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. <sup>13</sup> Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. <sup>14</sup> We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. <sup>15</sup> Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

<sup>16</sup> By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. <sup>17</sup> But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? <sup>18</sup> Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

<sup>19</sup> By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; <sup>20</sup> for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. <sup>21</sup> Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; <sup>22</sup> and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. <sup>23</sup> And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. <sup>24</sup> Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

This Wednesday, a wonderful article appeared in Christianity Today by Tish Warren. It pointed out a clash of views that happened Wednesday for the first time in 45 years. It was Valentine's Day, when the world celebrates the love of eros, as if that is the pinnacle of fulfillment in human life. Wednesday also was Ash Wednesday, the day that many congregations in the worldwide church commemorate the beginning of Lent, the season of reflection and repentance that culminates with Easter. Ash Wednesday is all about self-denial, and even death. Perhaps we should call it Ash Valentine's Day, where love comes to die. Wonder what Hallmark could do with that card.

And yet that sentiment is thoroughly Christian and is exactly where John drives us this morning. Surely marital love is celebrated in the bible, the fulfillment of eros is an important gift of God to men and women. But, when the Word of God calls us to love, it calls us much, much deeper than sexual fulfillment. Jesus said in John's Gospel 15 and in our text in 3:16, the greatest love is that one lays down his life for his friends.

True love, biblical love is one of self-denial and even selflessness; it comes with a cost to us all. With family, with friends, with spouses. Anyone married or in any relationship for more than 10 minutes knows it is not all flowers and chocolates and bliss. Instead to truly love someone close to us, even in marriage, often calls us to lay down our lives, our desires, our wants for the other. Or as Tish Warren summarizes: true love dies.

Where John takes us today is that the Real Jesus has loved us at the cost of himself. He took on flesh to come and die in love for you and me. And he calls to a similar posture in this world. What does love obligate us to do and do be in this world? In a Real Selfless way, the Real Jesus calls us, too, to be love in the flesh on the streets of this broken world.

To press that point, John, as he often does contrasts two ways of life.

**1. The Way of the World is selfishness, and it leads to hatred.**

To show us, John turns to the story of Cain and Abel, in v. 13. In fact, in the Jewish literature of John's day, pointing to Cain would sound a bit like if we cite Stalin, or Pol Pot, or sadly, some school shooter, a notorious and murderous character everybody has heard of.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Yarbrough, *1-3 John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 198.

What happened? In Gen. 4, Cain and Abel both made sacrifices before the Lord: Cain of his fruit of the ground (he was a farmer) and Abel that of sheep (he was a shepherd). Both sacrifices in themselves were acceptable, neither really better than the other one. But the Lord received Abel's sacrifice and not Cain's. It doesn't tell us why; Genesis simply hints that Cain's heart wasn't really in it.

But here, John, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit gives us a little more insight. Cain was, v. 12, "of the evil one" meaning his hatred originated in a heart of sin, dominated by the devil. And he murdered his brother.

Why did he do it? Here is the interesting part. Because [his deeds were evil and his brother's were righteous](#), v. 12. His hatred lay seemingly in the bed of jealousy, but not jealousy over that his brother was more gifted than he, or could do something better than he. He was jealous of his brother's righteousness. He was jealous and hated his brother because his brother's life reminded him of just how broken and sinful he was. The jealousy and exposure led to hate and then murder. He sought to find a way to make the shame stop, to silence the pain.

And I propose that MUCH of our hatred whenever we see it in our lives is rooted in the same thing! The hatred that gave rise to physical slaughter in Cain is the same jealousy and heart attitude to silence the shame and pain found in the world...and so often in us. How?

What do you do whenever you feel your sin exposed, and your hackles get up? We might not physically murder, but sometimes we do attack the person pointing out the fault, don't we? We say, but what about you! You have done such and so...to distract from MY sin, and my fault. In Jesus' parlance, we worry about the speck in another's eye, while neglecting the plank in our own. It is really hatred by contempt, seeking to murder another's credibility or silence their voice by hitting back hard with our own accusations. Attacking another with our accusations is merely a less violent way to say shut up to someone who reveals our sin.

Or, we play the comparison game to silence the righteousness of another. We rehearse for God and anyone who will listen all the ways we've been good. I'm not as bad a parent as they; maybe what I said was off color, but I'd never say what that person did.

Why do we do this? The strategy of the world, following Cain, is driven by that shame of feeling we don't measure up. We must silence the voice that says I'm not as righteous as another. We have to level the playing field. It really embodies hatred.

The truth is however, that NO ONE could ever level such a devastating critique of us as the cross does. No one will ever say something worse about you than the cross of Jesus does. Before the cross, our sin, hatred, comparison, is exposed and laid bare and we see that for all this we are judged condemned to die. There is no comparison we could make before another that would allow us to wriggle from under the cross. The cross KILLS our lame attempts at justifying ourselves before a holy God.

But the incredible news is that the cross, although it critiques us and says the worst about us, is an instrument of love, to drive us away from selfishness, to see the selfless love of Jesus, who knows us and yet pursues us with his love. Our selfishness, jealousy and hatred is exposed, and instead of being silenced by hatred, **the condemnation that we feel is squelched by love, the loving blood of Christ who washes us clean.**

## 2. The Way of God's people is love, and it leads to self-sacrifice.

What is the definition of love John gives us? V. 16<sup>16</sup> [By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.](#) The central definition of what love genuinely is, comes from looking at the cross where Jesus gave his life for us. He loved us at the cost of sacrifice of taking our sin on himself and being nailed to the cross as the guilty one. He pursued our good at a cost of himself. In fact, he gave what was most precious—his very own life—in order to reconcile us to our Father.

Yet this is not only a definition of love, seeing what Jesus has done. But also, v 16 says [this laying down of life](#) is the pattern of life we are called to follow. How? **Overflowing love given to us overflows from us to others.**

**Love Sacrifices.** It would be so easy to say we should love each other. But that is not what John calls us to do. To love sacrificially as Christ has loved is a bid to lay down life for others. **As one of my friends recently said, “We are called to take up love and bear its marks on OUR bodies.”**<sup>2</sup> Did you hear it in v. 16? We are called to come and die! We don't die for others as a redemptive act as Jesus did. But nevertheless, following Jesus' pattern, the call to love is the call to die to self, and selfish desires, thinking about and protecting only myself. Loving requires profound sacrifice of self beyond easy words.

The practical self-sacrifice John mentions is in v.s. 17-18, one has “**the world's goods**” meaning plenty, enough to share. Those with enough are called rather than closing their hearts, to love in deed by sharing, to look on others in love rather than contempt. This is a form of death, isn't it? To look at what I have and rather than thinking what can I consume, think what can I give? It is a fundamentally different way of conceiving of our possessions: not for self consumption but to share with others in need. Can you feel that pinch? How do we look at our possessions—house, car, money, food, time? Rather than being overwhelmed by all the need in the world, how about right here, in our local context, as John says others are in need, in our neighborhood, so to speak, how will we use our material plenty? **We can be overwhelmed overseas, but how about over the back fence?** Love sacrifices to ask what advantages do I have that can be spent and used for you.

**Love Reveals.** Of course, this question is why John says what he does in v. 17, that if one does not share, how can the love of God abide within him? The obvious answer is: it doesn't. Again, v. 19, by **this we know**, referring backward, by the presence of active love in our lives **we know that we are of the truth**. Love REVEALS that the life of Christ is within us. Again, down in v. 24, <sup>24</sup>**Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him**. Just as we saw last week, God abides in us, his seed in us, his new life in us, enabling us to love as Christ rather than hate as Cain. How can we love? Because HE abides in us! How do we know we are in him? Because we practice things that are not natural to us. **When we find ourselves doing it and wanting to do it more, again and again, as a pattern of life, it reveals something—**God abiding in us; it is a sign of life. It reveals a family resemblance, how we're being shaped like our Father. That's not natural; it's supernatural.

**Love is fueled by faith.** Finally, where does the power come from? How do we feed this new life rather than the beast of selfishness and comparison? In all the call to love, John knows we will fail and our **hearts will condemn us, v. 20**. Strength to keep going and trying to turn our hearts toward others in love rather than inward in selfishness comes from the gospel, v. 20, **God is greater than our hearts**. There is more powerful grace in him than there is condemnation in our hearts! That is, he overcomes our condemnation. And our work is to **believe in the name of Jesus, v. 23**. Whenever we are confronted with a clear view of our hearts, our sin, our needs, we must rest in, believe again in what Jesus has done, that knowing all this about us, he moved toward us in love. It is as we see the depth of his love toward us that we will find freedom to love. **Or put simply: overflowing love overflows.** His love for us that can't be exhausted is the fuel for our pouring out of ourselves in a costly love to others.

So, I ask you this morning, how are you doing in this aspect of family resemblance? On this Ash Valentine's Day. Do you love, bearing the marks of love, the cost in your own body? In the way and in the depth of Christ's love for you? When you fail, where do you go for strength? Look again, at how you've been loved in the cross, then you will find strength to love.

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<sup>2</sup> Greg Thompson, *MLK: the Voice We Need But Do Not Want*, TEDX Memphis, February 9, 2018.