

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Love in Action**

1 John 3:11-18

"This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another" (v. 11). No one's going to argue with that. It's foundational. It's fundamental. As the writer of 1 John says, it's the message you heard when you started out in the Christian faith. It's the message you've heard steadily along the way in your journey of faith. It's the message put before us again today right at the start of today's text. "We should love one another." It doesn't get any more basic than that.

But it's easier said than done. That's why we have a text like this one, that uses a certain kind of talk in order to motivate a certain kind of walk. That's because love isn't primarily an abstraction. It's concrete action, in the lives of real people in real circumstances. So the writer of 1 John doesn't spend much time describing love in theory. Instead, he moves right into a specific example of love, or in this case, the opposite of love, hate. He reaches back into the Old Testament and brings up the story of Cain and Abel. Cain, driven by jealousy and anger, killed his brother. Notice that Abel isn't just any stranger. He's Cain's own brother. This was a family crime. It created a devastating rupture among people who were related by blood.

Beware of similar kinds of deadly behavior in God's family. That's what the writer tells his hearers in this morning's Scripture passage. Though the folks in his particular congregation aren't related by blood, they are united by faith and baptism. They're spiritual kin. They're children of God, bound to one another within the family of God. So these spiritual siblings need to stay on their toes and make congregational security a priority, whether the threat is external or internal. After all, dangers from outside aren't the only ones that need to be opposed. Sometimes the greatest perils originate from within the church.

Just as Cain's hatred brought death into his family, so hatred and jealousy and anger bring the power of death into the life of God's family, the church. Though we don't know much about the precise kinds of misconduct going on in the congregation, we do know that the writer of 1 John doesn't treat them as insignificant incidents of minor misbehavior. No, whatever was happening was the kind of breakdown in church life that opened the way for the diabolical power of death. So the writer reminds them, and us, that the church isn't in the business of death. We're in the business of life.

Remember that we're spiritual siblings who have already crossed over from death to life (v. 14). God the Father sent Jesus the Son, and through the Son's death and resurrection, believers have already been brought out of the grave and into the life of the world to come. This means that forgiveness of sins and new life aren't heavenly prizes waiting to be claimed in the future. They're realities to be received and possessed and experienced in the present. In other words, what Jesus Christ has made possible isn't just life after death, but life before death. Life greater than death. Life that endures into death. Life that conquers death. No wonder the writer of 1 John warns about the kinds of attitudes and actions that give the power of the devil room to work in God's family. The realm of darkness can't be

allowed to gain a foothold in the community of believers. Wherever the death-dealing power of hatred threatens, the life-giving power of love must counter and prevail.

And what does this love look like? It looks like Jesus. The writer of 1 John says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us" (v. 16a). When we place the story of Jesus beside the story of Cain, the difference is unmistakable. In the narrative of Cain, hatred leads to death. In the narrative of Jesus, love leads to life. Cain's jealousy and rage deprived his brother of life. Jesus' self-giving action creates and imparts life to us. What Cain did sent his brother to the grave. What Jesus did brings us out of the grave. Christ's loving sacrifice of himself gives us eternal life.

The language of sacrifice, of giving one's life, comes up regularly in our public discourse, especially in light of our nation's military campaigns. If you've followed this week's running debate between Donald Trump and the parents of Army Captain Humayun Khan, you know how acts of sacrifice, and the terms we use to describe them, involve deep emotions and strong opinions. At the recent Democratic National Convention, Captain Khan's father, Khizr Khan, challenged Trump by saying, "You have sacrificed nothing, and no one" for the country. To which Trump replied by claiming that he had sacrificed by working very, very hard and employing thousands and thousands of people.

I don't raise this topic in order to join in the debate, but simply as a reminder that the concept of sacrifice, particularly "making the ultimate sacrifice," is a delicate and potent subject. Add to this the fact that we often throw the word "sacrifice" around pretty easily. We talk about sacrifices that parents make for their children. We talk about sacrificing some pay in order to still have a job. We talk about sacrificing time to make your community a better place. So we need to keep in mind that the language of sacrifice carries different implications in different contexts and circumstances. The word "sacrifice" comes from a Latin term meaning "to make sacred." Part of what we're doing when we remember those who have "made the ultimate sacrifice" is that we're making their death sacred, so that it's not viewed as just a meaningless, empty tragedy. We elevate the person's death, viewing it within a larger purpose or greater cause.

So what about the death of Jesus? What about his loving sacrifice of himself? What does the writer of 1 John mean when he says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us." It's important to remember that when we talk about Jesus' sacrifice, we're not reflecting on the death of a military hero, or any other type of hero for that matter. Important as those types of people may be, and as much as we should honor their memory, what Jesus has done is of a different order and magnitude, with eternal consequences for the lives of individuals, the state of the world, and the future of humankind. Jesus, the Son of God, is one with the Father in will and purpose. He is sent into the world as God's way of coming to us to save us. In the Son's self-giving death, which atones for our sins, the Father is present, revealing his love, and giving himself to us, so that we may become his children.

This is love in action, for our salvation. And it's costly love. It isn't cheap or shallow. It can't be separated from the cross. On the contrary, the cross is what defines this love. Author and researcher Brené Brown once talked about coming back to church after years away and the moment that "the whole Jesus thing" finally clicked. She said:

People would want love to be unicorns and rainbows. So then you send Jesus, and people say, "Oh my god, love is hard, love is sacrifice, love is trouble, love is rebellious." As Leonard Cohen sings, "Love is not a victory march . . . it's a broken hallelujah." Love isn't hearts and bows. It is very controversial. In order for forgiveness to really happen, something has to die. Whether it's your expectations of a person, or your idea about who you are. There has to

be a death for forgiveness to happen. In all of these faith communities where forgiveness is easy, and love is easy, there's not enough blood on the floor to make sense of that.<sup>1</sup>

"This is how we know what love is: Jesus laid down his life for us." There's blood involved in our reconciliation with God, and in the way that we receive and live out that reconciling love. So the writer says, "Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters" (v. 16b). In his book, *Written in Blood*, Robert Coleman tells the story about a little boy whose sister needed a blood transfusion. As one person tells it:

The doctor had explained that she had the same disease the boy had recovered from two years earlier. Her only chance for recovery was a transfusion from someone who had previously conquered the disease. Since the two children had the same rare blood type, the boy was the ideal donor.

"Would you give your blood to Mary?" the doctor asked.

Johnny hesitated. His lower lip started to tremble. Then he smiled and said, "Sure, for my sister."

Soon the two children were wheeled into the hospital room—Mary, pale and thin; Johnny, robust and healthy. Neither spoke, but when they met, Johnny grinned. As the nurse inserted the needle into his arm, Johnny's smile faded. He watched the blood flow through the tube.

With the ordeal almost over, his voice slightly shaky, broke the silence. "Doctor, when do I die?" Only then did the doctor realize why Johnny had hesitated, why his lip had trembled when he'd agreed to donate his blood. He'd thought giving his blood to his sister meant giving up his life. In that brief moment, he'd made his great decision.<sup>2</sup>

From a Christian perspective, love always involves some blood, some laying down of our lives for others, particularly those who are our brothers and sisters in the family of God. Remember that in order to show us the kind of love that leads to life, God didn't ship us a textbook, fire off a Tweet, or rent a billboard. No, he showed up among us in human form through Jesus, who lived and suffered and died and rose. That's love demonstrated. That's love in action. That's love where God puts his own skin in the game.

And if we profess to be God's children through faith in Christ, then our own behavior should reveal our parentage. Our actions should resemble the Father's action, shown in the Son. No wonder the writer of 1 John moves quickly from saying lay down your lives for one another, to citing a specific example. "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (vv. 17-18). Or as Clarence Jordan puts it in his version of our text: "My little ones, let's not *talk* about love. Let's not *sing* about love. Let's put love into *action* and make it *real*."<sup>3</sup>

When we do that, our life together as brothers and sisters in Christ can stand out in a day and time that's dominated by hatred, violence, and killing, in one form or another. So let's continue to lay down our lives for one another in specific, concrete ways, demonstrating that God has brought us out of the grave and into his presence, and that our purpose as his people is to nurture life, not take it away.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in William McDavid, Ethan Richardson, and David Zahl, *Law and Gospel: A Theology for Sinners (and Saints)* (Charlottesville: Mockingbird, 2015) 47.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Lindberg, *Leadership* (Vol. 5, No. 1) n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Clarence Jordan, *The Cotton Patch Version of Hebrews and the General Epistles* (New York: Association, 1973) 79.