

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Overcoming Hate With Love**

1 John 3:11-18

“We should love one another” (v.11). That, says the writer of 1 John, is the message that came to you right from the start. It was there on the lips of Jesus himself (John 13:34; 1 John 1:5). It was there when the gospel first arrived to you. It was there when you came to faith in Christ. It’s been there during your growth as children of God. From start to finish, it’s all about loving one another.

But love’s work isn’t done yet. While the message itself hasn’t changed, the circumstances in which the message gets repeated are continually unfolding. Preaching love is one thing; Practicing it is another. So the writer of 1 John, sometimes called the Elder, circles back to the realities on the ground in the congregation. These include a major rift in the family of faith. Some folks have left the fellowship because of disagreements about the nature of salvation and the significance of Christ’s atoning death. They’ve basically seceded from the community of believers.

At one level, the Elder is dealing with a dispute about doctrine. But at another level, these theological differences have important implications for Christian spirituality and conduct. In his letter, the Elder spends a lot of time trying to manage and address what he perceives as hatred coming from those who have exited the congregation. He knows that countering this hostility will take more than good arguments about doctrinal precision. It will also take persuasive conduct, characterized above all by love, especially love within and among those who have chosen to remain in the fellowship.

The Elder doesn’t call for a counterattack on those who are expressing intense ill will toward the congregation. He doesn’t try to make a case for revenge. Instead, he tries make the case for love. The kind of love within the community that can shine brightly when placed against the foil of hatred that the church is currently experiencing. What’s more, this love isn’t something that the congregation can work up on its own. It’s the love that grows from God’s prior love shown through Christ. It’s the power of God’s love, enabling them to love others, especially those who are hostile to them.

To make his case for love, the Elder cites an example of the opposite, 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. And 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, says the Elder. 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 cohesion a priority. And that’s true 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 community of believers. There's nothing as destructive as hostility and ill will within a church family.

In that respect, we in the church are a reflection of patterns of hatred and hostility in the larger culture. So much of the turmoil and violence in our society, whether in homes, neighborhoods, schools, places of business, or houses of worship, is grounded in and motivated by hatred. Dislike of those who are different. Resentment toward those who have wronged us. Antipathy toward those who are our adversaries. Contempt for those who are strangers to us. Enmity toward those with whom we disagree.

This is especially true in the arena of politics and government. In many cases, the thing that unites people these days isn't a set of shared convictions or agreement on a particular agenda, but simply the fact that they have a common enemy. They all despise the same person or abhor the same policy proposals. The way two commentators summarized it a few years ago still holds true: "Over the past few decades, American politics has become like a bitter sports rivalry, in which the parties hang together mainly out of sheer hatred of the other team, rather than a shared sense of purpose."<sup>1</sup> This is just one primary example of what many have characterized as the normalization of hate in our culture and society.

But as the Elder reminds us, in the life of the church, the family of God, there's no room for the normalization of hate. A few years ago, NPR did an interview with a young woman named Megan Phelps-Roper. The interview was subtitled, "If You're Raised to Hate, Can You Reverse It?" Phelps-Roper had grown up in the Westboro Baptist Church, a congregation that became widely known for its fierce public protests against Jews, members of the LGBTQ community, as well as the military. They picketed the funerals of American soldiers, and celebrated natural disasters and tragedies as an expression of God's judgement.

But in 2012, Phelps-Roper began to have a change of mind and heart, partly due to face-to-face interaction with people she had previously debated on Twitter. She eventually left the congregation, which included family and close friends, who never spoke to her again. A piece of Scripture that became even more meaningful for her was Proverbs 15:1: "A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger" (KJV). She also commented on the current partisan political bitterness and the people who influenced her, saying:

I remember this path. It will not take us where we want to go. We have to talk and listen to people we disagree with. And I will always be inspired to do so by those people I encountered on Twitter—apparent enemies who became my beloved friends. They ... came to me with pointed questions tempered with kindness and humor. They approached me as a human being and that was more transformative than two full decades of outrage, disdain, and violence.<sup>2</sup>

Phelps-Roper's experience sounds consistent with author Anne Lamott's statement: "... you can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."<sup>3</sup>

Disagreement, grounded in sincere convictions, is one thing, but hatred is another. Hate is rooted in lovelessness. So where there is hate, it needs to be countered and overcome by love. And as I stressed earlier, the kind of love that overcomes hate doesn't begin by looking within ourselves for the power to give ourselves for others. No, the kind of love that overcomes hate begins in the heart of God, who has revealed his desire to give us life by sending his Son into the world to reconcile us to himself and to one another. The Elder says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us" (v. 16a). Not our own inner resources, but Christ's loving sacrifice of himself for us, is what makes it

possible for us to become children of God, and to be the kind of family where hate is far from normal.

When hate threatens, we need to remember that the love of God is powerful. As the Elder stresses, God's love is powerful enough to transfer those who have faith from death to life. In other words, Christ's sacrifice of himself moves us out of darkness and into light, out of hatred and into love. Cain's hate-filled deed deprived his brother of life, but Christ's love-filled deed bestows life. Hatred brings death. It degrades and destroys life. But love gives life and cultivates its fullness.

In his book, *The Telling Room*, Michael Paterniti shares a true story he heard when he visited his father's ancestral village in Sicily. Every day while he was in the village, he noticed an old woman walking with her cane, struggling up a steep road to get to the local cemetery. Estimates were that at her tortoise pace, the walk from her home to the cemetery and back took about six hours out of her day. As one person has summarized the situation:

What grief inspired her difficult daily walk? Was she driven by sorrow over a departed child or a deceased husband, the love of her life? No, the locals told Paterniti that she was driven by *Astio*, or bitter hatred. Her archenemy was buried in that cemetery. So, rain or shine, the old woman walked up the hill every day to her enemy's gravesite, just to spit on it one more time.<sup>4</sup>

Hatred thrives on cultivating and perpetuating the power of death, the severing and destroying of relationships that are intended to give life.

In *Strength to Love*, a collection of some of his most well-known sermons, Martin Luther King, Jr. said: "Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction."

But God's will is life. God's purpose is to overcome the death-dealing hatred that's in the world, in the church, and in our hearts and minds. And that requires love. Not just any love. God's love. God's love, revealed in Jesus Christ, and taking shape in the community of Christ's people, the family of God. "Dear children," says the elder, "let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (v. 18). Or as Clarence Jordan puts it in his Cotton Patch Version, "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>5</sup>

As we make God's love real, both within the church and beyond its walls, hate gets overcome. Darkness gives way to light. Death gives way to life. Christ's self-giving sacrifice for us starts to show up in visible and tangible form. The message that has been there from the beginning gets both heard and heeded: "We should love one another." Whenever and wherever that happens, hatred gets put to death and love comes to life.

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster, "Negative Partisanship' Explains Everything." Politico Magazine. September/October 2017. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/negative-partisanship-explains-everything-215534/> (February 8, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> "Megan Phelps-Roper: If You're Raised to Hate, Can You Reverse It? TED Radio. NPR (October 27, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 41, No. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Michael Paterniti, *The Telling Room* (New York: Dial, 2013) 175.

<sup>5</sup> Clarence Jordan, *The Cotton Patch Version of Hebrews and the General Epistles* (New York: Association, 1973) 79.