

The Power of Love

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[0 : 00] Well, folks, we're going to look again at the passage. If you've got your Bible open or your phone app, 1 John chapter 3, we're going to look at this concept of love as we find it there in the passage.

If you support Aberdeen Football Club, there's a test. A lot of folks say that they support football teams, but they really couldn't pass a basic test.

So if you say that you are an Aberdeen supporter, we could apply various tests, of course. We could say, well, what's the name of the stadium? And everyone would know that. It's, of course, Petaudry, at least for the time being.

Maybe we'd ask, well, who was Peter Weir? Some folk would really struggle, but the real Aberdeen supporter was, ah, Peter Weir, the greatest winger we ever had.

He played 237 times for Aberdeen, a prolific goalscorer. You would be able to tell exactly when Alec Ferguson went and when he left.

[1 : 09] And you could name 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 of the current team. You see, if we say that we know something or we say that we love something, well, you've got to apply certain tests because many of us say that we love something, but we really don't.

1 John is about that. It is asking various tests whether somebody is a Christian. And there are three tests. There is the obedience test. You see that in chapter 2, 3 to 6, that we love him, we keep his commandments.

So someone who says that they're a Christian obviously has to live like they're a Christian. So that's the obedience test. And then there's the belief test, 1 John 2, 20, that we know things. There are certain things we believe as a Christian are central to us.

But then there's what is called the social test. And we see that in chapter 2, verse 9, that if we say that we are a Christian, then we have to love one another.

And so we're looking at this morning of the outworking of love in the life of a Christian. Now, love is one of those words which is devalued. I think in our own culture, big words are very often used to describe small things.

[2 : 37] And so our vocabulary has been devalued. I don't know if we can blame our American friends for this. To any American friends listening, no offense, is meant. But is our hamburger really awesome?

If awesomeness is left for something small, then what do we call things or people who are really awesome? The same is the word love. We may say, I curse you, I love you.

And it is something that we really haven't put much thought into. And so in this passage, we're going to be looking mainly at verse 11 downwards.

But let's just introduce it by looking at verse 1. Verse 1 says, See what great love the Father has lavished on us.

I just want to mention two things about verse 1 in introduction. First of all, that phrase, see what great love.

[3 : 44] I am just old enough to have been raised in the authorised version. And of course, my Bible verses, my memory verses are all authorised version.

Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us. The Greek word there for what manner of love or what kind of love is a fascinating word.

It's what species of love is this? From what country has this love come from? So if you're a bird watcher, you're sunning yourself in sunny Maastricht or Bridge of Dawn, and you're looking at the birds in the garden and it's the usual seagulls and crows and whatever.

And all of a sudden, this exotic, multicoloured finch arrives. And you maybe say, wow, where did that come from?

It is so different to the ordinary birds that come. It's so different. It's not so much otherworldly. It's from another country. And so when John is saying here about Christian love, it is so distinctive.

[5 : 09] It is so different. From what country does this love come from? There are unusual elements to it. That's the first thing we notice.

The second thing we notice is, you know, it says there, the love the Father has lavished on us. Now, lavished there in NIV is much better than the old day we bestowed upon us.

Lavished means there that God has not measured it out. He has poured this love on us. I had a friend who's still a friend, and he had an uncle.

And every Christmas, the uncle would buy a dindee cake. Those of you, again, who are younger may not know what a dindee cake is. Sort of nutty, fruity cake.

And he was a wealthy uncle. He was not short of a pound or two. But my friend used to say that every Christmas, he would get a dindee cake, and he would cut it in half.

[6 : 21] And he would give half to cousin one, and the other half to cousin two. How miserly. God doesn't cut the cake.

God gives us the whole cake. He lavishes his love on us. So verse one is speaking about the different nature of Christian love. It's like it's from another country, and it is lavished on us.

And the results are very significant, isn't it? It says that we should be called the children of God. So there's this sense of love bonding us together.

It's one of the bonds that make the Christian family a family. I was listening on Radio Scotland recently to, again, a fascinating interview between Bob Geldof and Janet Forsyth.

Bob Geldof, of course, the front man of the Dublin band, the Boomtown Rats. They were big about 30 years ago.

[7 : 29] And Bob Geldof, when he was talking about the rats, he said that not one of us, you know, Gary Roberts, Jerry Cotton, not one of us came from a normal family.

And he spoke about the effect that that had on the band. Families are something that's really, something that's missing in so many areas.

And yet, wherever we are this morning, whatever our status is, if we are a Christian, we have been loved much and we are part of the family of God.

But as we look at the passage, let's move on. We're looking more, verse 11 onwards, about the nature of love. And I just want to notice, again, briefly, four things about it from verse 11.

The first thing we notice is that it's a command. Now, that's almost countercultural. Let's look at it together.

[8 : 35] It says we should love one another. In the original, it is more of a command, not a suggestion. Now, that's fascinating because we don't normally know to, you know, see love as the command in our culture.

It's a feeling, perhaps. And yet, this is an absolute foundational truth here. The background here in 1 John is that the church was influenced by a group.

They were known as the Gnostics. The thing about Gnostics, the Gnostics were very cliquy and very elitist. And so there was this thing called Gnosis or knowledge.

And you were either in or you were out. I'm a great fan of the West Wing. And during lockdown, I've been watching it all again.

And there's one part in Series 3 where Josh is speaking about being on the inside. And Bartlett at one time says to Sam, listen, Sam, I'm going to take you into the inside here.

[9 : 46] In other words, it's just the inner circle of the present knowledge there. The Gnostics were like that. There was an elite group. 1 John is written to hammer that, to annihilate that.

Says, no, there is no clique. We should all love one another. It's not a feeling given to an elite few. It is something that is commanded of every single one of us.

It is an inclusive thing. We should all love one another, not just when we feel like it, not when we like the people, but we are commanded to do that.

Now, that's not to say that there's not natural affection, because you see there, don't you, verse 10 talks about brothers and sisters. So there's this act of will that we have to love one another.

John Calvin. Now, Calvin's not seen as the theologian of love by those who oppose him. But he says this, We cannot mock, hurt, or slander, or despise, or in any way offend one of our brethren

without, at the same time, hurting and slandering and mocking the Christ in them.

[11:12] And so we speak about a safe place. A few weeks time, the deacon's corps will be preparing your building to make it a safe place. There'll be social distance.

There'll be hand sanitizers. There'll be various things put in place to make the building safe so that people come into, and outsiders, they just feel that this is a place where it is clean, it is hazard-free. What about also making Bon Accord a safe place that in terms of whoever you are, however you feel that there is this whole culture of love?

Now, there's a very powerful image. Look at verse 14. It says there, We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another.

So in our mind there is command, and we know that we have passed from death to life. There's a radical change, and we become a loving person.

[12:21] Now, I don't know if you've switched utilities. They say, here's a little bit of free money advice for you. They say that everyone, at least once a year, should even take a day of work and to go through all their providers, their electricity, gas, home insurance, car insurance, go through everything, and change providers.

You can save up to four, five hundred pounds worth of cash for that. There's a free tip for you in the sermon this month. And one of the great things is that when you change utility providers, you don't notice a change.

That is not the case when we become a Christian. We know that we have passed from death unto life because there is this sense of command.

Our management system is different. The default settings of our heart are different. And so there is this loving impetus. There is this desire now to love, even that which before we did not love, and to love be unlovely.

And it's a sign that there is this transformative power, this compulsive love within our hearts. And there are various byproducts.

[13:47] Just one, just mention one. That of forgiveness. Corrie Ten Boom said this. Forgiveness is an act of the will.

And the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. Exactly what we mean by a command. Isn't Corrie Ten Boom so perceptive there and so profound that the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart?

So God is calling us to intentionally love people. And this is the radical nature of the new birth.

That's a command. But the second thing we notice in the passage, not only do we see a command, notice verse 12 onwards, we see a warning.

Do not be like Cain. Do you see it there? We should love one another, verse 11. That's the command. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother.

[14:58] That's the warning. I love the reality of the Bible. It's not Aesop's fables. It's not a work of fiction.

There's a reality there. Even the very first family, Adam and Eve, and of course their first two boys, Cain and Abel, the very first child on earth, murders the second child on earth.

It's a very serious point. So in the middle of this teaching about love, he's warning, he's saying, listen, even in us, don't be like Cain.

And then we think, ooh, there's a lot of issues are, you know, raised by this, this passage.

We see theodicy here, that the nature of evil, where did evil come from? And we see it there, but that's not, that's not what we're looking at here.

[16:04] He says, the reality of a civil war in history, there is the reality here of something in our own hearts, which is not good.

Now, it says here, do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother.

Again, in the original Greek, there's a big word there.

It isn't just who murdered his brother, it is who butchered his brother. Indeed, if you're a Greek scholar, look up the Greek word, esphaxon.

Esphaxon is the word that's used here, and it literally means to cut one's throat. And so, you see the language here, is certainly, post-watershed language.

Do not be like Cain, who slashed his brother's throat. And you think, what is going on in this passage?

[17:10] Very much connected to, what Jesus taught, in Matthew's Gospel, Matthew chapter 5. Remember, we see a parallel there, when Jesus spoke about hating someone, you actually murder them in your heart.

People often say, I've brought in every single commandment, except the sixth commandment, that thou shalt not murder. And yet, the warning here is that, if we do not love, if we have hatred in our heart, we are like Cain.

We are in that tradition, of hatred, which belongs to Cain. And we don't want to be like that.

That is the warning. And he's saying, listen, don't be surprised, my brothers, that the world hates you. There is hatred in the world. There is a civil war.

Life is not always happy. It's not always pleasant. It's really, really tough out there.

[18:21] It's not a picture postcard. It says, listen, don't be like Cain, because there's conflict out there. Behind the Cain and Mabel thing, of course, is envy.

And envy is very often seen as a minor sin, isn't it? It's not one of the big ones. And yet, envy led to hatred, led to murder.

It's a warning. Don't be like the world. There are no little sins. Those of you brought up in the jungle doctor stories will remember that famous jungle doctor story about the leopards.

And they're playing with this little leopard cub. And it is so cute. And they want to keep it. And they want to take it into the house. And remember what the wise man says, little leopards become big leopards.

And big leopards kill. Envy, well, it's a little sin. Little sins become big sins. And big sins kill.

[19:39] A lack of love kills the spirit, kills the soul, kills a fellowship, kills a marriage, kills a relationship, kills a church.

So what have we seen? Verse 11, we have seen a command. Verse 12, we've seen a warning. What do we notice on?

Well, the next thing we notice is a picture. And you'll see that in verse 16. This is how we know what love is.

This is a picture. 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.

This is the heart of the gospel. This picture of self-sacrifice, it's the opposite of the Cain and Abel story, isn't it?

[20:40] Cain, who for envy and selfishness killed his brother. Jesus is completely different. The supreme example of hate is contrasted with the supreme example of love.

Jesus, motivated by love, gave his life. Cain, motivated by hate, took life. The language is that of divesting, isn't it?

Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And what a life it was. It wasn't just a life in terms of a beating heart.

It was being the very Prince of Glory, living in heaven in perfect fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit. It is having heaven at his very command.

The earth is his footstool. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And he laid it all aside for us. Jesus gave his life.

[21:48] Not just the fact that it was at a very young age, the age of 33, but Jesus laid aside everything that was his.

He just looked so ordinary. Remember how Judas identified him in the garden to the Roman authorities? He said, the one that I will kiss.

It's just a little detail, but it's almost as if Judas is saying, this guy is so ordinary, you wouldn't know him. So to identify who he is, he looks so ordinary and plain.

It's the guy I'm going to kiss. He's the one. We have our own Prince, don't we?

Dear Prince Harry and Meghan, if the stories are to be believed, there you have a Prince who has renounced his royal status for material gain and personal satisfaction.

[22:55] Jesus renounced so much more for sinners. He had to go through death on a cross. And so that's the picture. That's what love looks like.

It is not something which is sentimental. It is not something which belongs to a chick flick or something that is manufactured from Hollywood, Bollywood or wherever it is.

An authentic picture. And so we are called to lay down our lives, that desire for admiration.

We're putting others first. We are not counting the costs. We see a command. We see a warning.

We see a picture. But we also see a challenge, don't we? The picture there is seen in verse 16. This is how we know what love is.

[24 : 00] Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And here is the challenge. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

If anyone has material possession and sees his 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.

So, there is a real challenge here. And I guess this is the application that comes out of the passage. One of the things that lockdown is doing, we're hearing is that people are suffering in the net. One friend of mine said that early lockdown, they were listening to five sermons on a Sunday.

Maybe this morning is your first, maybe it's your second sermon of the go. And if you open up to the USA, it kicks off in the afternoon, you can go for five or six sermons yourself.

[25 : 20] How shall we learn? What is the challenge? Well, the challenge here and the specific example he's given is that we help people with our assets.

Now, here is quite a, again, an interesting thing. We ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters, plural. So, we're seeing all the plurals there in verse 16.

Moves on verse 17 to a singular, if any one person has material needs. So, it's easy to have a love for humanity as a whole.

It's easy to have love as a concept, but not for individual men or individual women. I think often these days, we think too much in collective terms.

I hear people where they're talking about ministries to the poor, as if the poor was a homogeneous collective who were all similar, or a ministry to the rich, or a ministry to men and women, as if one demographic behaved the same as every single person in that demographic.

[26 : 44] No. Remember about the rich young ruler, Jesus looked at him and loved him. So, it's from the many down to the individual.

So, think of someone in need. Now, in our tradition, we have for too long, put this as irrelevant social gospel stuff.

Excuse me, are we reading the Bible here? If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need, but there's no pity on him, how can the love of God be in that person?

So, there's got to be a giving away here. There's got to be a helping. We are all in this together.

John Stott said this, as life does not dwell in the murderer, love does not dwell in the miser.

So, love motivates us for what we do. Going back to that interview I listened to between Bob Geldof and Janet Forsyth, towards the end of the interview, as you know, Geldof is a kind of emotional guy.

[28 : 05] He's an angry man. His anger, remember his anger during live aid, he said this, and I wrote it down at the time.

He said this, anger is the animus of what I do. Anger is the animus of what I do. In other words, he says, my motivating principle in life is anger.

Our motivating principle is love. And that's a transformative thing. Transform us.

It will transform you as a congregation. If you just live as you are. As Christ has renewed our heart, as he's given us this great example.

Dionysus was an early Christian writer. And he wrote about how the Christians responded to the plague in Alexandria.

[29 : 16] There were thousands of people dying per day in the plagues in ancient Rome. He writes here of how the best amongst the Christians honorably served people until they themselves caught the disease and died.

We don't advocate that in the current crisis. We don't want to be carriers of the disease. But he said this. I thought it was quite interesting.

Most of our brother Christians, he said, showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another.

He writes, heedless of the danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ. And with them departed this life serenely happy.

For they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting all their pain.

[30 : 23] Now, we could, of course, with our modern scientific knowledge, criticize them for maybe carrying the disease more than curing the disease.

But they were motivated by this love. And so, folk, we end where we began. As Christians, and those of you who are interested, who are tuning in to the video this morning, we are challenged to a life of love.

Yeah, that's the sermon title, challenged to a life of love. And in one sense, it's not a difficult challenge to take up because we've been mesmerized by the other worldliness of the love that we have seen in Jesus.

And we have lots of love to give because it has been poured with a Niagara fogs-like intensity upon us.

And so, behold, what manner of love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called the children of God.

[31 : 52] Let's pray. Father, thank you again for your word given to us today. Help us not simply to be hearers of it, but help us to be doers of it now.

Amen.