

Love or Hate?

1 John 3:9-18

Walking in the Light
A study through the book of First John

As a child, moving into my teenage and college years, I was a very black-and-white type of thinker. Things were either good or bad, right or wrong – according to what I thought were standards that everyone should adhere to. As Tracy and I grew in our dating relationship, there were many times where I'd state something emphatically as fact, judging someone's motives because of certain behaviors, and she would say, "Are you confident that's the only conclusion?" Or, "Don't you think there could be other reasons for why they did it than what you're assuming?" While I didn't like being confronted like that (because I liked having my little black-and-white world with everyone), she expanded my horizons to be more understanding and gracious. She still challenges me in this to be curious, not simply judgmental. And this matches Jesus' interactions with all different types of people. The disciples thought they knew, but Jesus challenged them left and right on all sorts of beliefs, didn't he?

We're challenged in this in various ways. Just think about Paul's teaching on engaging with different cultural dynamics. To the Jew, he's a Jew. To the Greek, he's like a Greek. He personally is fine with eating meat offered to idols, but if that would sear the conscience of another Christian, he won't do it. Paul will confront Peter for switching tables from the Gentiles when Jews enter the building. Yet, Paul also participates in certain Jewish rituals, like shaving his head. But he's adamant that circumcision doesn't matter, but if Titus is ministering to a Jewish area, he tells him to be circumcised.

As I say this, some people may be tempted to think that I'm a relativist – meaning that I'm saying that there's really no absolute truth. Everything is nuanced and nothing is black and white. That's *not* what I'm saying. The reason I bring this up is because through the years of growing in the Word, my relationship with God and with others, I've discovered more of the difficult "gray" situations that requires dependence on the Spirit for God's wisdom to be revealed through the Word and prayer. I've also discovered in the midst of the nuanced scenarios that there are clear black-and-white standards by which we ought to live.

What I've seen through the years is that *when* the Bible teaches us in the "black-and-white," God is telling us that this is a no-questions-asked, all-important issue. Black-and-white communication means this is so serious because it is of central importance. So, in our communication we must be careful to ensure that when we're emphatic and black-and-white, we're talking about things that God says are essential for all.

Ok, with this backdrop, you may be wondering why I've said all of this. What does this have to do with 1 John 3, right? Well, a lot because the apostle John is very black-and-white in his writing. What we saw last week is that you either practice sin and are of the devil or you practice righteousness and are righteous. We'll see in the text today that you either hate and abide in death or you love and have God's

life. John uses very black-and-white language, and the reason he does this is because we need to get the seriousness of what's being said. Like I said last week, if you want to try to wriggle yourself out of these categories and make a third category, John won't let you. For all of you listening to this sermon today, you ought to walk away today knowing you're in one of these categories, and I pray that you are reconciled with God and growing in his love instead of abiding in death. There's only one or the other. There's only black or white. Which category are you a part of?

With all this said, the main idea of the sermon today is this: **Exercising practical, self-sacrificial love reveals that we are God's children.** If you recall last week's sermon, the title was, "Who do you imitate?" We saw from John's teaching that humans either imitate God or they imitate the devil. John expands on these thoughts to reveal what imitating God looks like and what imitating the devil looks like. That's what we'll see in today's text.

Let's now look at just verses 9-10. This will serve as a transition from last week's sermon to this week's text: No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.¹

John's words here, pick up on the same theme as what we studied last week. He emphatically states "no one born of God makes a practice of sinning." If you have questions on what "practice sinning" means, please take time to listen to last week's message. That said, I will give you another way to translate this idea. **No one born of God makes a settled practice of sinning.** This is John's conclusion from verses 4-8. But why won't a Christian have a settled practice of sinning? Why won't they just continue in it until the day they die? John gives us two reasons. First, **God's "nature" abides in them.** Did you know that when you turned to Jesus for forgiveness and reconciliation with God, God not only forgave you of your sins, and gave you Jesus' righteousness credited to you, he also placed within you his "seed." This word "seed" gives the idea of the DNA. Just like my children have a part of me that made them; so it is with anyone who has trusted God. He has mysteriously and incomprehensibly placed his righteousness within us. This affirms what the apostle Peter wrote in 2 Peter 1:3-4: **His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness. . . ,by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.**² What does it mean to be partakers of the divine nature? It means that we have God's nature even at work within us so that we can kill sin and obey God. A Christian cannot have a settled practice of sinning because God's seed is in them! And God's seed cannot be taken from his children. That's the next point. **God has given them new birth.** This idea of "new birth" is what theologians refer to as regeneration. It's a new life. This may remind you of the story Jesus had with Nicodemus. Jesus said that the only way he could see God's kingdom was if he was born again. What we discover is that this refers to the Holy Spirit coming into our lives, opening our eyes and giving us the grace to look to the Lord for life and satisfaction in him. Now, let me ask you something: If God went through all of that in order to miraculously save you, bring you into his family, give you his "DNA" so to speak, don't you think he's given us everything we need to persevere in the faith? Do you think God will fail in aiding us in our pursuit of godliness? No, he won't fail.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:9–10.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Pe 1:3–4.

Therefore, John gives us another black-and-white phrase: By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.³ If you do not have a settled practice of righteousness – meaning, if you’re not wanting, not pursuing with desire, obedience to the Lord, then you’re still a child of Satan. How devastating. I pray that’s not anyone here, but if so, please listen. Jesus came to rescue you from Satan’s grip. He came to rescue you from your own sinfulness. He took the punishment in the place of sinners. He satisfied God’s justice and also, with arms open wide, brings forgiveness to anyone who would turn to God on the basis of him! What love, amen? But notice that John doesn’t stop with the term “righteousness” here. He adds, “nor is the one who does not love his brother.” That’s interesting. Right here, John makes a transition. He’s been using terms like righteousness and unrighteousness and lawlessness. Now, he brings up “love.” And that’s what will fill the rest of our time this morning.

Why does John move from the theme of “righteousness” to “love?” Well, think about it. In 1 Corinthians 13, we’re told that love is the virtue that will last for all eternity. The first characteristic of the Spirit’s fruit is love. We’re told love is the perfect bond of unity. Jesus said all the law is summed up in loving God and loving others. It’s sad to me that we may not automatically associate “righteousness” with “love.” It’s sad because I think so many people have this idea of “righteousness” as stuffy and self-righteous. But righteousness is only righteous if it’s expressed in love. As one man put it, “Love is righteousness in relation to others” (Plummer, *The Letters of John*, Stott, p. 131). I find this to be tremendously encouraging and helpful. John has been saying that those who trust in Christ will grow in righteousness, and we ask, “What does that look like, John,” and he says, “It looks like love.” But even here, to ensure we understand this, John gives us the contrast. He shows us the difference between love and hate. Knowing the contrast in love can help spur us on all the more to genuinely love. So again, John uses the black-and-white to help us here. God and love go together. The devil and hate go together. Which one do we imitate? Love or hate?

At this point, I want to give you fair warning, I’m going to jump around a little bit in these verses. And I want to start with John’s teaching on hate. Then we’ll look at what he says about love. I want to end here because John said in verse 10 that those who do not love are not God’s children! My desire is that our assurance in the Lord would grow and abound! So, let’s dive into these verses more, and first ask,

1. What does hate look like (vv. 12-13, 15)?

Read verse 12 with me: 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.⁴

First, we see that hatred involved **murder**. And John here goes back to Cain, the first murderer ever. Notice that John says that Cain was *of the evil one*. This means that Cain’s “father” so-to-speak was the devil and he followed the devil’s impulses. Also, according to the book of Genesis and the genealogies, Cain becomes the head of the unrighteous world. Meaning, the Savior isn’t going to come through the line of Cain. So, Cain’s father is the devil. He leads the world in being the first murderer, and the world for centuries have followed his lead. Ventura, I just want to stop here and say how this grieves me even today: from the shooting in Holland around Hope Campus this past week to the school shootings to the

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:10.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:11–12.

the gang wars to national wars that bring about death. Do you feel this world is broken? It is. The world has followed Cain's example.

But you might hear this and, while sad, will say, "Phew! I don't hate because I haven't murdered anyone!" Well, I'm glad you haven't murdered someone. Truly, I am. But that's not all John is saying here. Another characteristic of hatred is **self-exaltation**. Why did Cain murder his brother Abel? Because his evil deeds were exposed by his brother's righteousness. Why do I say "self-exaltation" with this? Because Abel's actions were of such that Cain, rather than repenting of his unrighteousness would rather kill his brother than admit his wrong. Cain, like Satan, exalted himself above, and he would do anything to do it – even murder. But get this, self-exaltation over people and hatred are at the heart of murder. This aligns with Jesus' teaching in the *Sermon on the Mount*, right? Jesus said if you *hate* your brother, you're guilty of murder.

So, let's get practical. Maybe you haven't murdered someone, but you have been so angry that you just with that person ceased to exist. Do you feel that way towards people? More specifically, do you feel this way towards other Christians? The emphasis of John here is how we relate to Christians (our brothers and sisters in Christ). How do you treat the Christian family? Over the last ten years, not only has our country become more divisive, but I've seen so much divisiveness amongst Christians. Believers attacking believers and speaking almost as if they wished the other didn't exist. We must be careful. Satan is the accuser of the brethren. Let's not imitate Satan. Let's not exalt ourselves over our brothers and sisters, but instead pray for them. Let's not wish they didn't exist, but that the Spirit would work through us so that we would grow more and more in repentant faith and unity.

And, as a side note, if you feel like the world hates you, don't be surprised. Just as Cain, the representative of the world, hated Abel (who represents God's children), so the world will hate us. I say this because of verse 13: Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.⁵ This should be a freeing statement for us. When people around us hate us for maybe not putting the pride flag around our photo on Facebook or because we say Jesus is the only way, we shouldn't be surprised. We shouldn't be surprised if governments imprison Christians. This might incite fear in you, but this truth freed the early church. They didn't fight against people, but instead, even while being persecuted, they showed love to their enemies. They actually served them. The same can be true of us. People can say or do things against us, but then we have the opportunity to show them the radical love of God in return. We won't fight back with Cain's weapon of hate, but with God's eternal grace and love!

In all of this, if we then love our enemies, we ought to then love our brothers and sisters. This is God's way. This is God's example through Jesus! With all this said about hate, then John states in verse 15: Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.⁶ This is what hatred looks like. This is the reality of the murderer. Now, let's ask,

2. What does love look like (vv. 11, 14, 16-18)?

Verse 11 says, "For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another."⁷ The verse begins with the word "for." That means it connects to the previous verse. Those who do not love their brother is of the devil *because* God's message all the way from the beginning has

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:13.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:15.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:11.

been to love one another. God's command has always been *to love*. So, since Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil, that means he came to empower those he saved to love. Now, we can ask, "What does love look like?"

First, we see that it is **transformative (v. 14)**. In verse 14, we read, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death."⁸ John looks at himself and all the Christians he's writing to who are suffering under the attacks of the false teachers. The Christians may be losing their assurance. They're confused. Are the false teachers right or wrong? Are they right or wrong? But John bolsters their assurance by saying, "Look at how we love! We're different than the world." How we love should bolster our assurance. As I said weeks ago, when we obey the Lord, we should be overjoyed! Instead of being shocked that we sin. We should be amazed when we actually obey because that's all of God's grace and love working through you.

But why do I say "transformative" here? Because John gives the stark black-and-white realities. Those who actually love their brothers, meaning fellow Christians, have gone from darkness to light. We've passed from death to life. Do you love fellow believers? That's a miracle of grace! That means a transformation has taken place in your life and in your heart. God's love transforms. We don't merely get together with people who have commonalities over specific likes and dislikes; we love each other because we have experienced the love of Christ. Now, we are family and we love one another – even those of us who are very different from us!

Secondly, we see that love is **self-sacrificial (v. 16)**. In verse 16, John writes, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers."⁹ Jesus laid down his life for us. He sacrificed his life. The phrase "laid down" has the idea of taking off a robe. Jesus shed his life. How much more sacrifice could there be? From the earthly perspective, he gave up *everything* to give God's love to the world. So many love hearing this. I know I do. Tell me the "old, old story of Jesus and his love!" But this verse goes on and says "and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." Would you be willing to give up your life for your Christian family? I'm not talking only about your physical family, but in times of persecution, would you be willing for the praise of God's name?

Ventura, I've thought about this. Throughout history, generally the first type of person to be persecuted within Christian churches is the pastor. Read the stories. We can go back to the apostles and then to Polycarp to Wycliffe to John Bunyan. If America becomes more hostile towards Christianity, I'm in the bullseye. Will I love the Lord and love you by taking the persecution? By God's grace, I believe I will. He will give the sufficient grace for it then because I've been transformed by Jesus. Jesus gave his life for me, and I pray that I would daily be so melted and moved by Jesus' love for me that I would sacrifice my life for the brothers and sisters in Christ! I pray that for you, too.

But you know what? We can say we'd be willing to die for our brothers and sisters, but would we really? It's like some husbands who will say, "I'd die for my wife," and yet the marriage is falling apart, and we can say, "Yes, but will you live for her good?" It's similar here. We can say that love means that we'll sacrifice our lives. We can say we'd be willing to do the things that will make a big splash, but what about the practical, day-by-day stuff? That's where love is really seen.

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:14.

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:16.

And, that's the third point: love is **practical (vv. 17-18)**. In verses 17-18, we see the following: 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? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.¹⁰

You might say you're willing to die for Christ's Church, but will you live for the church's good? One man once wrote this: It's easier to be enthusiastic about Humanity [in general] . . . than it is to love individual men and women, especially those who are uninteresting, exasperating, depraved, or otherwise unattractive. Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular" (Lewis as *quot. in The Letters of John*, Stott, p. 145). Did you hear that? It's easy to say we love everyone, but what about our actions?

This is a similar example to James' example in his letter. You see a fellow Christian with a need and you don't try to help meet that need. John says, "how does God's love abide in him?" Just as the "murderer has no life in him, the miser has no love in him" (see Stott, p. 145). Do you give of yourself to fellow believers? Jesus gave his life for them. Will you follow the example of your Savior and Brother, Jesus? Will you live out the DNA of God in you? If you'd give your whole life, then surely you'd give of yourself in getting together with Christians, ministering to them, bearing one another's burdens, praying with and for one another, paying for hospital bills that another cannot afford, and on and on and on.

God's love shines through Jesus, his Son, and his sacrifice for us. God's love will shine through us, his children, and our sacrificial love for one another. Exercising practical, self-sacrificial love reveals that we are God's children. Even if the world hates us, so be it. We don't live for them. We live for God, and he will both strengthen us and shine his light out to others in this world who will be allured to Jesus even through our love for one another. **May we be so satisfied in Jesus that we imitate our Savior and live out his love.**

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:17–18.