

The Righteousness of Love

a sermon in the series
Life in the Son

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1 John 3:10-18

In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. 11 For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, 12 not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous. 13 Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. 15 Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. 16 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? 18 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.

A person may fool others and persuade them that he or she is a Christian, but the Word of God will not allow that person to play the charade forever. As John has done throughout this Epistle, he does here again. He first deals with what we are—either we are righteous or we are not—then he deals with what we do, either righteousness or unrighteousness.

If you proclaim to be a Christian, then we can know you are by what you do. That does not mean that what you do makes you a Christian, it's only evidence of what you already are. If you claim to be a Christian there ought to be certain evidences in the way you live and John will not have us believe that being good is what it means to be a Christian. Anybody can be good. Why, even the devil can be nice. He often appears to be an angel of light to beguile and to deceive, so being good is not what he's talking about here when he says *practicing righteousness*.

No matter how much you try to pretend to love, sooner or later it will be exposed whether your love is genuine or false. The nature of God-like love is so contrary to our fallen human nature that the pretender can only go so long before his or her performance is seen to be an act, and a very poor one at that.

Our text says in verse ten,

“Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.”

John links righteousness with love.

Notice John does not say, “Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not like his brother.” Some of you sigh in relief because there are just some people you find difficult, if not impossible, to like.

Love is not to be defined as liking people. You ask someone if there is anyone they don’t like and they might say no, as Will Rogers said, “I never met a man I didn’t like.” But like and love are not the same and therefore liking someone doesn’t mean you love them.

Liking is purely natural. It’s instinctive and basic to your personality. You meet someone and you automatically like or dislike them. If you like them there is something about their personality you find attractive and it happens very naturally. Or it could be the very opposite, there could be something in their personality that repels you. You can’t put your finger on it but you know you just don’t like this person. It’s quite unconscious, meaning you didn’t choose to like or dislike them. That, my friend, is something that belongs to the natural realm of our existence.

Love has nothing to do with the natural but with the will. Love is a commitment. It’s deeper than emotions; it’s a commitment to serve someone else without any conditions. In this way you can love even somebody you don’t like.

Martyn Lloyd Jones said it this way,

“To love those whom we do not like means that we treat them as if we did like them—to choose to act kindly toward them even though we do not like them.”

He’s right. Perhaps there are a lot of people we don’t like, but we’re still commanded to love them. “Love your enemies,” Jesus said.

John says one who has been born again has something within him or her that gives them the ability to love. At times we may not choose to exercise that ability, but the divine nature implanted within us grants it and is there to influence us to make that commitment to other people—to commit ourselves to them. It’s this characteristic of love that is the evidence of true Christianity.

This is what John is driving at here. It’s not about being good; it’s about loving people. Even those you find difficult to like. As Jesus loved us, He says we are to love. Not to the same degree of course—no one can do that—but in the same way, we are to love.

Jesus told us, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Look at verse ten. John says the children of God and the children of the devil are quite plain to recognize. One will practice righteousness, one will not practice the righteousness of God. One

will love his brother, one will not love his brother. Which leads me to this question, what does John say righteousness is?

I. What is Righteousness?

John answers the question here in verse ten—it's to love, beginning with your brothers and sisters in Christ. John will tell us in the fourth chapter of this Epistle that "God is love," therefore, God's righteousness is to love.

John is showing us that the root of all Christian righteousness is love. If Jesus is in you, and in Him there is no sin, then there is going to be in you a heavenly influence to not sin. John says in verse ten through eighteen that there is in every Christian an inward, divine motivation to love, not to hate. That's righteousness.

So the test of Christianity is not necessarily your good works of niceties and kindnesses, but love. Are you, for the glory of God and the good of your fellow man, committed to them for their betterment and for the glory of Christ? That is the evidence of true Christianity.

This is so serious because when you narrow down true Christianity to that kind of test, and remove it from the realm of religious practice—going to church, giving money, doing good deeds to neighbors—and put Christianity in the straight jacket of loving others, all of us have reason to examine ourselves today.

II. What is Unrighteousness?

John again answers in verses eleven and twelve,

"For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, twelve not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous."

A. Cain's Wickedness Was That He Did Not Love His Brother

John defines all unrighteousness as hate. Hate toward God and your fellow man. He gives Cain as an illustration. Cain killed his brother, Able, but Cain's wickedness is not just that he murdered his brother. Cain's wickedness is that he did not love his brother. The act of Cain's murder of Able was the fulfillment or completion of something that was going on in the heart of Cain long before he rose up and slew him.

John describes Cain here as a child of Satan because he hates like Satan hates. He's of his father, the devil. Those that are of God love as God loves. Those who are of Satan hate the way Satan hates. The Bible says Satan was a murderer from the very beginning because he's a person of hate, an unrighteous being. Cain's jealousy triggered him to murder his brother and was a result

of loving himself more than he loved Able. He saw that God favored Able because Able was righteous, so a jealousy arose in the heart of Cain toward his brother. The murder he committed didn't begin without premeditation, but even before the premeditation something happened in Cain's heart.

I want to answer a question. Maybe you're not even asking it, but I think it needs to be asked: Why are hate and murder linked?

Look at verse fifteen,

“Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murdered has eternal life abiding in him.”

Why does John establish hatred as the same thing as murder? It's the same reason Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount.

“You have heard that it's been said of old, ‘You shall not murder,’ and whoever murders will be in danger of judgment.’ But I say to you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause should be in danger of judgment.”

B. Why Hate and Murder are Linked

It seems unfair to link the act of slaying a human being with animosity in your heart. One seems a whole lot less in degree than the other. However, they are inseparably linked because hate is to despise someone, which will lead to a severing of the relationship with that person. Murder is simply the fulfillment of that attitude. That's why Jesus said if you have anger in your heart against a brother without cause you are in danger of judgment, because you are severing a relationship and an act of murder is simply the fulfillment of that.

C. Three Sources of Hate

As I prepared for this message I did a lot of research trying to define what hate is and the cause of it. It was amazing what I read, especially from secular authors. They actually couldn't explain hate. But I'm not surprised, they can't explain love, why should they be able to explain its opposite? They gave all the rational explanations of why one has hate. Most of the dictionaries define hatred as intense feelings of dislike, but what's amazing is that the apostle John—without a degree in psychology—breaks this thing down for us and unpacks it like no psychologist I read this week. John would say that “the intense feelings of dislike” was an inadequate definition of hatred.

I. A Hatred that Arises from Jealousy.

We've already seen Cain as an example of a hatred arising from jealousy; he was jealous of his

brother because God honored Able's sacrifice and disdained Cain's. That's how it often begins. We see someone and think we deserve what he or she is getting. It might be the attention or approval of someone we value that we're not getting but someone else is. Or maybe it's a promotion at work, or maybe they didn't raise their children according to the Scriptures and yet their children are proving to be outstanding while you did all you could and your children turned out in ways you had hoped not. The reasons for jealousy are as numerous as there are circumstances, but that's how it begins. You believe somebody is getting something you are worthy of but not getting it.

2. A Hatred that Arises Out of a Perceived Wrong or Offense.

Another reason for hatred is somebody does wrong to you, at least you perceive it to be so. I have discovered after years of mediating relationships that whenever most relationships are in trouble, whether it be friendships, or two brothers or sisters in a church, or even husbands and wives, they are over insignificant things. And it's usually not even reality. It's one person perceiving the situation to be real. They felt as if that person did them wrong, when the person themselves didn't intend to do them wrong. The perception of offense created hatred in their hearts. That person owes me; this person has done me wrong. Disdain sets in and they begin to pull away from that person.

3. A Hatred that is Simply Closing your Heart to Someone.

There's no emotions attached, there is no perceived or actual reality. There is no jealousy, but there is hatred nonetheless.

Look at verse seventeen,

“But whoever has this world's goods and sees his brother in need and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?”

Here John makes it clear. The person who is having difficulty financially didn't do anything to you. You're not jealous of them, they don't have anything and you have abundance. There's nothing to be jealous of. But you look at them and see their need and simply close your heart to that person. You do not allow yourself to make a commitment to that person that will help them. John calls that hate.

Perhaps John is being too strict? But if hate and murder are inseparably linked because both sever relationships. The act of murder begins in the heart and is just the completion of animosity in the soul. Can it not be true that to simply close your heart to your brother or sister in need, whatever the need may be, is the same thing as severing relationship with them? John says it is. That is hatred. It is just as vile in the sight of God as Cain's murder of his brother.

That's what John wants us to see, my brothers and sisters. To close our hearts to any believer is

the same as the act of murder. Sometimes we don't recognize hatred in our hearts because we don't have the intense feelings of dislike that defines hate according to the secular. We don't have this intense dislike for people and conclude we do not hate.

But here's my question: how open is your heart to the brothers and sisters?

John's not even dealing with how we should treat the outside world, those who are not saved; he's dealing with how we treat one another.

By closing our hearts to one another and saying, "well, that's not my concern," you are removing that person from your life. You sever the relationship that you have with that person, or you never start a relationship. Now please listen, there are some of us who have to work harder at this than others.

Some of us by nature are outgoing. We do not meet strangers. There is a propensity to find the good in people, to be sociable, to be outgoing. That's physical as we said earlier, not spiritual, it's just the way you are hardwired. There are sinners who are like that.

But then you move into the spiritual realm and deal with the gift of mercy, for example. Some of you here, it doesn't matter what the need is, will respond immediately. Sometimes you have zeal without knowledge, because you want to help the person even before you find out what the circumstances are, *let's just touch them, let's just help them, let's just minister to them. You don't have any problem with this. You're sitting there today thinking, that's me. I can do that, praise God. I love my brother and my sisters and therefore I am a Christian.*

There are some of us, on the other hand, who are just the opposite. We're not so outgoing, we don't like many relationships. We're not very social or we're not so merciful or giving.

How many times have you said this statement, "I hate interruptions"?

J.T. and I were talking about this the other day when I was sharing my dislike of cell phones. Although I have one, I dislike them because it feels like I'm tethered all the time. Anybody can call or text at any point in the day and interrupt me. What is it I don't like? Well, to be quite transparent with you, I don't like people to interrupt what I'm doing, and with even a text or a phone call keep me from doing what I want to do. That's the truth about it and I can't make it sound spiritual. *Don't interrupt me, I'm busy. If I don't get these things done today then I have to lay my head on my pillow and feel guilty that I didn't get it done today.*

But there is something wrong with that, and I acknowledge that about my own nature. There is something wrong when I am quick to close my heart to people who need to talk to me than I am to open my heart. John calls that hate. Another word he uses is unrighteousness. That's why this text is so serious to me and says a lot to me.

Let me tell you about those sources of hate. There is one thing they all have in common. In all three kinds of hate, the root is the same. It's an inordinate love for self. In other words, a person values themselves over others. That's the root of all hate and the root of all unrighteousness. It is to value you more than you value others.

That's why John says in verse thirteen, "Do not marvel brethren if the world hates you," because the world hates Christians. The world wants to sever any relationship it has with Christians. The world likes good people; it is all the time giving accolades and praises and awards to good people. But Christians they despise and try to sever any relationships with. They hate us and want nothing to do with us. They would be much happier if we weren't here at all.

Now listen closely, when you shut out other believers you act just like the world.

I shouldn't be surprised that the world hates Christians, but I should be shocked when Christians do the very same thing. What do you do when you have animosity toward another believer, even a family member? You want to distance them from your little world and your little reality. They won't conform to your world, they won't please you, they won't do what you want them to do and you can't control them, so what do you do? You remove them. You sever the ties that bind. That's what we do. We don't call it hate, we certainly don't call it unrighteousness or evil, we just simply use a little euphemism that softens it, "Oh, we've just kind of grown apart over the years." No, we're acting exactly like the world. We're severing people from us we do not love.

III. The Test of Righteousness

Here's how to know if you love or not, verses fourteen and fifteen,

"We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him."

How do I know I've passed from death to life? I love the brethren.

Before conversion the entirety of your life was to please you. You were what it was all about. You picked a mate, a career, all based upon what pleased you. So many people say they "fell in love." You don't fall in love. That's wrong. That's emotional and purely a strong like or affection, not love. Somebody brings pleasure to you and you want to pursue him or her because they do something for you. It's not about what you do for them. So every decision, everything you have ever done works through the grid of the question "What's in it for me?"

Every decision you ever made before you were saved was based upon that question. Some things you chose not to do because what was in it for you was pain, difficulty, financial hardship or something you would not enjoy. You only chose things if it brought you pleasure. But after you're saved something happens. Your nature has been changed and God has instilled a new grid with a

new question that asks, “What’s in it for the glory of God and the good of others?”

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

After conversion our desires have changed to gratify God and others. That’s how you know you’ve been brought out of darkness and into light and passed from death to life. There is now an inner compulsion to glorify God, to please Him and bring Him joy as well as others. Do you do that perfectly? No. That’s why it’s called unrighteousness. Every human problem and every relationship problem is stemmed by an act of unrighteousness or unloving actions. But this is the general tenor of your life—to love God and your neighbor.

IV. The Great Example of Righteousness

“By this we know love, because he laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John 3:16-17)

Jesus is the demonstration of love. That’s how we know love. We know love because we saw Jesus live it. Jesus loved you and did not consider His own bodily and emotional needs, but was willing to suffer unimaginable horrors in order to satisfy and love you where you are. That’s the Gospel.

How, if God loved you, could you not love someone else when you are just as guilty of sin as they are? We are to follow Christ’s righteousness. We also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. How do you do that?

I. You make the choice to love people.

In verse sixteen, John is saying to lay down your life for another is the test. Does that mean I have to physically die in order to love someone? The answer is no. It’s not just reserved for dying for someone. The example here of Jesus is to be seen in light of what he said about Cain. Cain was completely self-centered and did everything for Cain, not for Able. Jesus is exactly the opposite. Jesus did everything for us and denied Himself. The point is that even though Jesus did physically die, God is not calling us to physically die for one another. How many opportunities will you have to physically lay down your life for someone? Probably very few. Does that mean you don’t love or are guilty of hate until you do lay down your physical life? Of course not. The picture here is that you deny your rights in order to please those around you.

You mean I deny my rights? That’s not right to deny my rights. That’s the whole point. Jesus had no reason to deny the glory that was His with the Father, but He did. He had no right to be counted among the transgressors, but He was. How many times did Jesus in His life say something to the

affect of, “I didn’t come to be served, but to serve and give My life a ransom for many”?

We need to be careful not to cast John’s term here as anything but an example of how to live and love. Love is the same attitude Jesus had toward us. Here is how the Apostle Paul said in Philippians 2:3-5,

“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit,”

If you could do that, you would do the rest. Don’t do anything out of protection for yourself. Don’t do anything for self-gain. Don’t do anything that would cause you to take advantage of someone else.

“but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.”

There’s the whole crux of the matter—do you really believe that your brother deserves to be served, or do you believe you deserve to be served by your brother? Do you believe your brother should be held up or should he hold you up?

“Let each one of you look not unto his own interests,”

It’s not wrong to look out for your own interests or have plans that God gives you and to seek them. It’s not wrong, but at the same time Paul says to also seek out the interests of others.

“Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus.”

2. Act on that choice.

Look at verse seventeen of our text,

“Whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”

John demonstrates love as self-sacrifice by something other than dying for someone. He illustrates it by a person in financial need and loving that person by sacrificing your own resources to meet their need. That’s the point. It’s not about physically dying; it’s dying to to your own interests at the expense of a brother or sister’s needs.

John proves in verse eighteen that being nice is not just love. He says, “Don’t love in word only, don’t say to the brother or the sister as James instructs us, *We’ll pray for you*. Do something if you have it within your means to do so. If you don’t, then pray for them.” If you have the means with which to do something and you don’t do it, John says that’s hate. That’s unrighteousness, and if you practice that you are not born again.

The Jewish fable about two brothers demonstrates true love. They were both farmers whose farms bordered each other, and one year the harvest was exceptionally good and the brothers decided what they were going to do with their surpluses. One brother said to himself, "You know, here I am with a wife and children and my brother is single and he's all alone, I think I'm going to take some of my surplus and put it in his field tonight without him knowing."

The other brother was thinking at the very same time, "Here I am, a single man. I don't have too much responsibility, and here my brother has a wife and children. I think I'll take my surplus and put it in his field tonight without him knowing."

And in the escapades of that night, they met each other trying to put surplus in each other's fields.

That's what the community of faith ought to look like. Trying to bless each other with what God has so bountifully given to us. We ought to be bumping into one another trying to bless one another. That's what this church ought to look like.

So often we gear the services to make people look at their own problems. We do that because we want to pray for you. But the danger is that we get you to look to your problems and you can't see anybody else's.

Let me suggest to you if you come to church with burdened hearts, try this and see what God will do with your heart: Come to church to see who you can bless. See whose hearts you can unburden. Come looking for somebody you can find to love, instead of coming to find somebody to love you.

I want everybody that is going through difficulties to be ministered to, but how is that going to happen if all of us have problems ourselves and burdens we're all bearing? And we all do.

Please don't stop sharing your burdens with us. But as you're sharing your burdens, listen for the burdens of others and when you hear another burden gravitate to it and leave yours to God. The Bible says, "This is love, that Christ loved us and gave Himself for us." We ought to do the same for one another. That is the righteousness of love. I pray we are passing the test and that we have found ourselves passed from death to life. Darkness to light. Amen.