



This morning we're going to talk about your love life. We usually think of that in terms of romance but I mean it in a broader sense. We're going to talk about love as it pertains not only to our spouses or our significant others but to other relationships as well. It's safe to say love is the most talked about thing in the entire world; the most popular idea on planet earth. We see it in the movies we watch and the songs we listen to. Love is powerful. The allure of love sells most products today. Everyone is talking about love. And yet, there seems to be quite a bit of disagreement about what love really is.

A group of 8-year-old children was asked, "What does 'love' mean?" Here are a few of their answers:

Rebekah: "When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandpa does it for her, even when his hands got arthritis, too. That's love."

Billy: "When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth."

Bobby: "Love is what's in the room at Christmas, if you stop opening presents and listen."

Nikka: "If you want to learn to love better, you should start with someone you hate."

Tommy: "Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well."

Jessica: "You really shouldn't say, 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot."

It's amazing how wise children are. It's interesting that, as we get older, we sometimes get cynical about love. One of the most popular TV shows the last few years is *Mad Men*. The show revolves around the conflicted world of Don Draper. His high level position at an ad agency gives him all the money and power a guy could want. During the show's first episode, he explains to a woman in the office the essence of his marketing job and his entire world view: "What you call love was invented by guys like me, to sell nylons. You're born alone and you die alone and this world just drops a bunch of rules on top of you to make you forget those facts. But I never forget. I'm living like there's no tomorrow, because there isn't one."

In contrast to that cynical, twisted view of love, the apostle John writes about genuine love. In John's mind, love wasn't invented by selfish men, but love originates with God. He wants us to

know that anyone who claims to know God must love like God. Love is the mark of a genuine Christ-follower. Turn in your Bible to 1 John 3:11–24.

### The Essentiality of Love

John begins by talking about the essentiality of love.

**For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another (v. 11).**

John says this command to love one another is nothing new. It's been around since the beginning. He's probably referring to Jesus who said to his disciples at the last supper: "***A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another***" (John 13:24). Love isn't optional for the follower of Christ. And John is talking about love between brothers and sisters in Christ. He's not talking about love in general here. There is a sense in which we're to be loving towards all people, but there's a special kind of love and a unique obligation to love that exists between believers.

To reinforce his point, John gives a negative example from the Old Testament.

**Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you (verses 12–13).**

Most of us have at least heard of the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. These two sons of Adam and Eve each brought an offering to God. Abel brought an animal, one of the first born from his flock, which pleased God. But Cain brought an offering of the fruits of the soil, and God wasn't pleased. We don't know exactly why God wasn't pleased, but John says Cain's actions were evil. Notice how Cain was jealous of his brother; he saw God was pleased with his brother, but not with him. That bothered him deeply. And so, although God graciously invited him to repent, Cain murdered his brother.

This is an interesting example because Cain wasn't an atheist. He believed in God and even made a lame attempt to worship God, but John says he didn't belong to God. Remember, John was dealing with people who much like Cain claimed to know and worship God, but their actions said something different. Then John adds kind of a side note here: Just like Cain hated Abel, don't be surprised if the world hates you. In essence he says, "Is

there someone in your life that really doesn't like what you stand for as a Christ-follower? This has been going on since the days of Cain and Abel. That's what you should expect from them." But John also wants us to know we're supposed to be different.

### **The Evidence of Love**

So he goes on and talks about the evidence of love. By that I mean what love is the evidence of—what loves proves. John says,

**We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him (verses 14–15).**

John loves to use that little phrase, "We know..." How do we know we've passed from death to life? He's talking about spiritual death and spiritual life. When a person places their faith in Christ a miracle happens. They go from being spiritually dead to having new life in Christ. The Bible calls this "regeneration." That's why we baptize people. They go into the water and that symbolizes the old person is dead and buried, but they come out to show they've been raised up to new life. But how do we know that's happened? What's the sign? Love! Love is the evidence of that new life. Love is the mark of a Christian. The one who doesn't love remains dead; there's no life in him.

In this context, John makes a strong statement. He says, "*anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer.*" We don't like to hear that, but it's the same thing Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:22). You see, the hater and the killer share the same attitude. The action (murder) is the outcome of the attitude (hatred). Human courts can only judge our actions, but God judges our hearts. This doesn't mean that hatred in the heart does as much damage as murder, but in God's sight they're the moral equivalent.

The next thing he says is also strong, "*and no murderer has eternal life in him.*" This doesn't mean a murderer can't repent of his sin and receive forgiveness; of course he can; we have many examples of that in the Bible. He's talking about holding onto bitter hatred and hostility towards a fellow believer and justifying it as a way of life. You can't do that and claim to have the life of God in you. Again, this is exactly what some in John's churches were doing. They were holding onto Cain-like hatred of their brothers, yet claiming to know God.

You may be proud you've never killed anyone, but how many people have you killed in your heart? When will that hatred you hold onto boil over? Last week I read a book called *Mirror to the Church* about the genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994. Before 1994, Rwanda was the "poster boy" of evangelization in Africa. Hundreds of thousands of people had come to Christ in Rwanda. There are two main tribes there: Hutus and Tutsis.

Both of them had many converts and they worshipped together in the same churches. But there were deep seated tensions between these two groups that simmered beneath the surface for decades. Then in April of 1994 those tensions boiled over into an intense fire and Hutus began killing Tutsis with machetes. Eventually, 800,000 Tutsis were murdered.

A Hutu man recalled how not long after the killing began he went to choir practice at his church in Kibungo. He said, "We sang hymns in good feeling with our Tutsi compatriots, our voices still blending in chorus." But when they returned for church the next morning, the Tutsis weren't there. They had already fled into the bush. This angered the Hutus in the church, and they decided to chase after the Tutsi church members. He said, "We left the Lord and our prayers inside to rush home. We changed from our Sunday best into our workday clothes, we grabbed clubs and machetes, we went straight off to killing." Brothers and sisters who had sung together the day before were suddenly mortal enemies. Many churches became places of murder because Tutsis often fled to churches for sanctuary, thinking they'd be safe. They weren't.

I'm not even sure I know how to make sense of that, but my fear is that in God's eyes this kind of killing goes on all the time in American churches. We don't use machetes; we use our tongues. Just like the Hutus, we allow bitterness and jealousy to burn within us for years, and God forbid that those fires should ever be kindled. But John wants us to know we can't live like that and claim to have the life of God within us.

### **The Essence of Love**

In verses 16-18 he goes on and shows us what love looks like.

**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 (v. 16).**

This is the essence of love. The essence of love isn't being a friendly, nice person. It's a good thing to be friendly and nice, but don't mistake that for love. The essence of love isn't having warm and fuzzy feelings for someone. It's not even in feeling sorry for someone. Again, that's not a bad thing. Feelings are an important part of life. It's good to feel compassion for others, but that's not love. Nor is the essence of love found in mere words. A young man says to a beautiful young girl, "You're beautiful! I love you!" What does he really mean by that? Well, we know what he means! He means "I want you!" But that's not love.

John says we know what love is by what Jesus did. He laid his life down for us. So the essence of love is an action. It's an action of self-sacrifice that's done for the good of another person. John is just repeating what he heard Jesus say, "*Greater love has no man than this, than he should lay his life down for his friends.*" But Jesus didn't just talk about it; he did it. And John says this isn't just an act to be admired, it's an example for us to mimic: "And

we ought to lay our lives down for our brothers and sisters." Just like Cain is the prototype for hatred, Jesus is the prototype for love. Cain took away life; Jesus gave his life. That's a high calling! That's a hard calling!

Felicitee Niyitegeka was in charge of an orphanage in a small village of Rwanda, where she cared for children, most of whom were Tutsi. When news of the genocide reached her, she hid over 30 Tutsis in her home and helped many more flee to the Congo. Her brother was an army colonel, and he asked her to stop protecting Tutsis, but she refused. When the militia came to her home, they told her she'd be spared because of her brother, but those in her orphanage would be killed. She said they'd stay together in life or in death. They tried to get her to change her mind by shooting each child, one by one, in front of her, but she didn't waver, and finally they killed her. Before the militia leader killed her, he asked her to pray for him.

That's an example of how John defines love in verse 16. But true love isn't just expressed in supreme sacrifice, it's also expressed in small acts of giving. Few of us will be called to an act of heroism like Felicitee, but all of us are called to everyday acts of love. So John goes on and brings the essence of love down to the everyday.

**If anyone has material possessions and sees a 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 (verses 17–18).**

John forces us from the general to the particular; from the heroic to the everyday. I love what C. S. Lewis said about this: "It is easier to be enthusiastic about humanity with a capital 'H' 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." It's like the guy who said, "I love mankind, it is people I can't stand."

John gives an example of love that involves three conditions. First, I must see a brother or sister in need. That happens all the time, right? Second, I must have the means to meet that need. That's not always true, but it's true more than we'd like to admit. Third, I must act to meet that need. John says, if you don't do that, how can the love of God be in you? He then challenges us to move beyond talking about the needs and do something. Sometimes we think because we feel bad for someone or because we talk about how desperate their situation is, we really do love them, but that's not love. Love is seen in actions.

I find this to be both challenging and humbling. Part of me wants to say, "We live in a day and age where we see so many needs. In John's day they didn't have TV and newspapers, not to mention the internet. We see far too many needs than we can possibly meet." But I don't think John is talking mainly about people out

there we see on TV. I think he's talking mainly about brothers and sisters in Christ we meet along our everyday path. I think he's talking about seeing a couple with three kids who never get to go out and offering to watch their kids for an evening. I think he's talking about hearing of a brother in Christ who just got home from the hospital and bringing a meal over to his house. I think he's talking about that single mom who struggles to pay her bills and just anonymously paying her rent one month. I think he's talking about opening your home to people who are new to the area and maybe to your church; just having them over. It seems to me we all have two resources we can give: we have time and we have money or material possessions. Which do you find harder to part with?

The other day I went to the donut shop to pick up some donut holes for a party. I walked in and handed the guy my debit card and he said, "Cash only." I was a little perturbed because I didn't have any cash on me, so I left to look for an ATM machine. I got some cash and returned to the store and the guy behind the counter said, "Already paid." I said, "What?" Again, he said, "Already paid," and he pointed to a guy on a bike riding away outside the store. It seems that guy had paid for my donut holes while I was getting cash. I was dumbfounded. I thought, "Maybe he goes to CPC and I just didn't recognize him." So I hopped in my car and caught up with the guy and he was barely in his 20's. I thanked him and he simply said, "Hey, no problem. It's happened to me before."

What bothered me about that is I'd never do that! I probably wouldn't do that even if that person went to CPC! But it was a fitting rebuke for me. If a stranger would do that for me, shouldn't I be willing to at least do that sort of thing for my brothers and sisters in Christ?

### **The Effect of Love**

John has talked about the essentiality of love, the evidence of love and the essence of love. Finally, he comes to the effect of love.

**This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything (verses 19–20).**

These are difficult verses to interpret, but I believe John is simply saying that the positive effect of loving one another is a sense of assurance in our relationship with God. Most of us know what it feels like to have a troubled conscience; to have doubts about where we really stand with God. Some of us have more sensitive consciences than others, and this can be both a blessing and a curse. If you as a believer have a sensitive conscience, and if you at times feel condemned before God, here's how to find assurance.

There are two things you can fall back on. First, fall back on the fact that you really have shown practical expressions of love for others. When he says, "This is how we know that we belong to the truth..." he's referring back to the practical expressions of love we've shown. Look at your life. Look at the ways God has compelled you and used you to help others. If you're a Christ follower, you **have** shown love to others, perhaps even more than you realize!

But then he says that even in that we might feel like we're not doing enough. The very thing that might bring rest to our troubled conscience brings more fear and doubt. So he offers a second source of assurance. He says, "***If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.***" The second source of assurance is God himself, his greatness and vast knowledge. It's like a trial: Our heart is the accuser, we ourselves are the defendant, and God is the Judge. Whenever our hearts accuse us, we the defendant must set it at rest, but how? We turn to God. God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Our conscience isn't infallible; its condemnation may be wrong. In those times we can rest in the fact that God is greater and more knowledgeable than our own conscience. He knows everything. He knows our secret motives and deepest resolves and he'll be more merciful towards us than our own conscience is. His knowledge of us should relieve us, not terrify us. Now I should add there are times when our conscience accuses us justly. In those times, we should simply confess and fall back on God's promise to forgive us in Christ. Remember what John said in chapter 1? "***If we confess our sins...***"

Then John spells out a benefit of assurance.

**Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us (verses 21–24).**

Assurance before God gives us boldness and effectiveness in prayer. Do you believe in his Son? Do you love one another? That's his command. If you do, that shows you have his Spirit. You live in him and he lives in you. And out of that relationship comes a vital and powerful prayer life. Our requests flow out of our life in him and he answers them. This means that our unwillingness to love will hamper our prayer life. Without love, we lack assurance. Without assurance, we lack confidence in prayer.

I was reminded this week of what Peter said about this in the context of marriage (I said this was about your love life). In 1 Peter 3:7 he says, "***Husbands...be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.***" What's he saying? If you're not being considerate, respectful and loving towards your wife, your prayer life will be affected. Your prayers will be hindered. Your relationship with God will be impeded. It's the same thing John says.

So we come back to where we started: Anyone who claims to know God must love like God. The *essentiality* of love comes from the fact that this is the command Jesus gave us from the beginning. The *evidence* of love is that it proves we belong to him. The *essence* of love is seen in self-sacrificing actions. And the *effects* of love are assurance and answered prayer. How's your love life? Is there someone whose need you can meet, but for some reason you've turned away? Is there someone who needs your time or could benefit from some other resource you possess? Is there someone who simply needs your forgiveness and mercy, perhaps even just a kind word? Don't waste a minute but go and for Christ's sake love them. Love them like God in Christ has loved you.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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Catalog No. 1388-7