

Loving Your Brothers and Sisters in Christ

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Date: 31 December 2006

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[0 : 0 0] by asking a rude personal question. You may perhaps giggle a little bit nervously when you hear what the question is, but in the light of what I'm about to read in the scriptures, in 1 John, it's a question that does need to be asked.

Just for a moment, take a glance at the person sitting next to you. Or if there isn't someone sitting in front of you or next to you, just turn around and have a look at somebody very close by. Now, that person that you've just looked at belongs to the same fellowship, the same Christian fellowship that you do.

And here is my rude personal question. Do you love him or her? Now, I'm not asking if you like the way that that person dresses.

You may think, in fact, you're allowed to think that their choice of clothing is the ultimate in bad taste. And it may be. I'm not asking you if you share common interests with that person.

They might, for example, like golf. And to you, golf may be the supreme abomination of modern man. I'm not even asking whether you like that person.

[1 : 1 1] Inevitably, in any church fellowship, there are going to be some people that we're more drawn to naturally than to others. But my question is, do you love that person? Now, to find out what the Bible teaches about loving others, loving other Christians, and how it defines love, let's turn, if we may, together to the first letter of John, chapter 3 and verses 11 to 18, which is our reading for this morning.

If you have one of our visitor's Bibles, you'll find this on page 1022. The first letter of John, chapter 3 and verse 11.

And I think this passage will help us to answer that question that I've put to you. So here we go, verse 11. For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

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.

Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers.

[2 : 3 2] Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. 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. Now in this first letter of John, John is holding out to the Christians that he's writing to three important measures whereby a person may know whether he or she is truly a Christian.

John is writing to assure his audience that they really do belong to Christ. And the three measures that he holds out to them, the first one we looked at about three weeks ago, is the measure of obeying Christ.

Does a person have a life which has this general tenor and direction of obeying Christ or not? That's the first measure of the real Christian, whether we want to obey him. That doesn't mean to say we never sin.

[3 : 55] There will be sins, but is the general direction of life in the direction of obeying him? That's the first thing. Secondly, there's the question of what doctrine, what understanding we hold about Jesus Christ.

We'll be looking at that, God willing, in a fortnight's time. Do we hold the true doctrine about him or not? And the third one is the one that we're looking at today. Do we love other Christians, the brothers and the sisters in the church?

Now, John defines us here, this mark of the true Christian, in verse 14, where he says, we know that we have passed out of death into life. In other words, we know that we truly are Christians who belong to the Lord.

We know this because we love the brothers. Now, notice that John is not talking here about loving everybody. The Bible does teach us, of course, to love all human beings, not least our enemies and our persecutors.

But here in 1 John, the mark of the true Christian is loving other Christians. We love our brothers. That's what he says. And of course, by brothers, he means our brothers and sisters, fellow Christians of both sexes.

[5 : 03] And to put this the other way around, he explains that if we live as enemies or in hatred towards our fellow Christians, that demonstrates that we're not really Christians at all.

So verse 15, everyone who hates his brother is a murderer and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. So here is John's second measure of the real Christian and that is that he or she loves other Christians.

Now, let's trace this through in this first letter of John. In verse 11, John tells us that loving one another is part of the original message.

He says, this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Now, what beginning might he be talking about there? You'll notice that Cain and Abel are introduced in the very next verse and that might lead us to believe that John has in mind the beginning of the human race, way back in early Genesis.

But it's more likely that he's referring to the beginning of the new era. In other words, to the teaching of Jesus. Because it was Jesus who said, a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you.

[6 : 17] And John the Apostle, John the Evangelist, had obviously taken this very much to heart. There's a delightful tale told about John in his old age. One of the early church fathers or teachers was a man called Jerome, who died in the year 420.

And Jerome wrote a commentary on the epistle to the Galatians. And in that commentary, he tells the story of Blessed John the Evangelist, as he calls him, being carried in extreme old age.

I guess he was 85 or 90 at the time. And he couldn't walk into the church anymore. So he was carried in, in the arms of his friends every Sunday to the congregation. And he could no longer preach. He was too old.

He was so frail and so old that all he could say was, little children, love one another. Now his friends apparently got rather tired of the fact that he would say this week after week and never seem to say anything else.

So they said to him, Master, why do you always say these words? And he replied, because it is the Lord's command. And if this only is done, it is enough.

[7 : 22] Now, I don't suppose we'll ever know whether that story is really historical. But it's certainly true to the strong emphasis that we have on loving the brotherhood in 1 John and in fact in all of John's New Testament writings.

Now having established in verse 11 that this command to love one another springs from the teaching of Jesus himself, John then proceeds in verse 12 to give us what you might call a genealogy or family tree of hatred and murder.

He traces these twin monsters right back to their founding father who proves to be Cain. That's interesting that Adam doesn't take the blame for absolutely everything that goes wrong.

We know that sin entered the world through Adam. Paul explains that in Romans chapter 5 verse 12. But this particular manifestation of sin, murder, didn't appear until the next generation.

So this means that it is to Cain that Agatha Christie, P.D. James, Ruth Rendell, and such others owe their living.

[8 : 33] Now you'll notice in verse 12 that behind Cain there lurks the shadow of somebody else, the devil. Cain, says John, was of the evil one.

In other words, he belonged to him and shared his nature and he murdered his brother. Now that fact of belonging to the evil one doesn't mean that Cain was not responsible himself. He certainly was.

But it does reveal what was really going on when the first murder took place. The devil was there and very much involved. The Lord Jesus tells us in John's Gospel chapter 8 that the devil was a murderer from the beginning.

So the devil is not just the deceiver or the accuser. He's not just the traitor in false words and misleading ideas. He is also, at bottom, determined to destroy human beings.

The more people he can take with him to the bottomless pit of the book of Revelation, the better he will be perversely pleased. Destroying human life.

[9 : 35] That's the devil's aim. That's why there's such a brutal irony in the phrase the children of the devil that you find in verse 10. Those who remain unbelievers are called the devil's children.

They partake in his nature. But whereas most parents are devoted to the welfare of their children and the happiness of their children, the devil's final desire for his children is to see them in the lake of fire.

It's a horrific thought. So, this impulse towards hatred and murder comes down through the generations from Cain. And according to verse 12, what was the motive for Cain's murder of Abel?

John puts it like this. Why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brothers righteous. Now, surely, that's another way of saying that his motive was jealousy.

John doesn't actually use that word, but that's the thought. There is Abel gladly and trustingly offering up his sacrifice of lambs to the Lord. You remember how Abel was a shepherd, whereas Cain tilled the soil.

[10 : 46] But Cain's offering of the first fruits of the soil was not offered, clearly, in the same spirit. John says here that Cain's actions were evil.

And that last sentence in verse 12 is a very illuminating commentary on the original account in Genesis 4, which leaves a lot unsaid about the motives of the two brothers.

But this last sentence in verse 12 uncovers much that Genesis 4 leaves hidden. Cain was jealous. Not with the jealousy that covets another person's superior gifts, but the jealousy that covets another person's superior righteousness.

Cain's attitude towards God was profoundly wrong and he knew that Abel's attitude was right and he couldn't stand it. He hated the idea. So it was jealousy that begat hatred and hatred that begat murder.

That's a terrible family tree in itself. Now the reason why John goes poking about in this very dark corner of human history is that he wants his Christian readers to understand in some depth what it means to love their brothers and sisters.

[12 : 02] John wants them and of course he wants us to see that the human race falls into just two categories. Only two. the Cainites those who belong to the devil and who will therefore inevitably hate those who belong to God and also the Abelites who trust God and love God and who will therefore inevitably be hated by the Cainites.

So this is why John goes on to say in verse 13 do not be surprised brothers that the world hates you. You, the Abelites but because you are Abelites you will inevitably love your fellow Abelites.

If you don't if you hate them then you demonstrate that you are a Cainite after all because verse 15 everyone who hates his brother is a murderer and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

So the one who hates a Christian who is set antagonistically against a Christian is not on his way to eternal life. He may pretend that he is a believer but says the Apostle he is not.

Now this brings us back to verse 14 where John spells out his second measure his second criterion for knowing who is truly a Christian. We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers.

[13 : 29] So the Christians the true Christians fundamental way of relating to other Christians is that he loves them. Now I want to get down to some nitty gritty areas of the practical application of this teaching in a few minutes time.

but first let's try and get our minds around two strands of John's teaching here. First of all the first strand concerns the goal or the destiny of the one who loves and the second concerns the character of the one who loves.

First then the goal of the one who loves. It's there in verse 14. We know that we have passed out of death out of the realm of death out of the dominion of death the sphere of death into life the sphere of life.

That's the goal out of death that was the original place of residence if you like for every person out of death into life once we become believers.

Now John might have written this rather differently. He might have written we know that we have believed in Christ because we love the brothers. Or he might have written we know that we've been forgiven by God because we love the brothers.

[14 : 42] But he chooses instead to use words which open up a perspective on eternity. We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers.

Now when did you last say to somebody if you were describing your own life as a Christian I passed from death to life when I put my trust in Christ. Have you ever expressed it that way to somebody?

I guess we rarely speak. We're shy of speaking of our faith in those eternal terms. We're much more likely these days to use the terms of modern popular psychology.

Like we might say when I became a Christian I got sorted out. Perfectly true isn't it? Or we might say since I became a Christian my life has been built upon a much firmer foundation.

Again very true. But we tend to use the categories of this world's experience. But John is teaching us here in this little phrase to see our conversion in terms of eternity.

[15 : 40] As a passage a transference from death eternal death he means to eternal life. It's a very different way of speaking. And I guess it's something which the modern church needs to rediscover.

You probably sometimes listen to Thought for the Day on Radio 4. It's often not a very encouraging experience but there are some good thoughts for the day on Radio 4. Anne Atkins is one who is prepared to speak out boldly for the gospel.

I remember some time ago she made a broadcast where she was firing some delightful broadsides at those who dismiss Christianity as pie in the sky when you die. And her final words were these.

But Christianity is pie in the sky when you die. not that the Bible of course would ever use such trivial language as that but it is about eternity.

And the apostle is not frightened you see of talking about death as well as life. Passing from the realm of death and hell and passing to the realm of life and heaven. It's a peculiar feature of much modern Christianity including some modern evangelical Christianity that eternal death has almost dropped out of the vocabulary.

[16 : 56] Folk have become embarrassed to talk about it. Embarrassed perhaps to believe in it. Well the apostles are not embarrassed to believe in it or to write about it. Look again at the second half of verse 14.

Whoever does not love abides in what? In death. Now the modern instinct would be to rewrite that and say anyone who does not love is no Christian.

But John won't allow us to avoid the stupendous eternal implications of belief or unbelief. Think of it like this. By the year 2070 most of us will no longer be living on earth will we?

A few of you younger ones if the Lord hasn't come back by then you may be but most of us will be will be long on the brown side of the turf when it gets to the year 2070.

Now in that year 2070 we shall have no interest whatever in Murrayfield or Twickenham or in Scotch salmon and Hollandaise sauce or in the beauties of Wester Ross in the month of June.

[18 : 09] But the question whether we are in death or in life that will be the important thing to us then. Think of the way Paul the Apostle puts it if only for this life we have hope in Christ we are to be pitied more than all men.

If our Christianity is only to do with benefits in this life we are pitiable creatures Paul is saying. Do you not understand the gospel? Many Christians need to relearn that the gospel is first and foremost about eternal life and salvation is supremely about being rescued from eternal death.

Look again at what you might call the theme text of this letter. Chapter 5 verse 13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

That you may know that you have eternal life. Not so that you may know that you can enjoy peace of mind in Glasgow in 2007. No, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

So the goal of the one who loves their brothers and sisters is eternal life. We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love our brothers.

[19 : 26] Now the second element I'd like to focus on concerns the character of the one who loves. Let's look at verse 16 here. In chapter 3 by this we know love that he laid down his life for us.

Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. Now in this verse we have the example of the one who loves.

No doubt we can think of men and women who are great examples of love both within the Bible and outside it. But John here shows us in verse 16 the ultimate standard of love.

This is how we know love. He laid down his life for us. That is the demonstration of love. That is the Bible's great declaration of love that he laid down his life for us.

Now friends you know what a declaration of love is don't you? It's an important moment in the lives of many people. A declaration of love is what he says eventually to her when he's plucked up sufficient courage.

[20 : 31] she perhaps likes him. I'm thinking of boys and girls who are young men and young women. She likes him and she's more than interested to know if he perhaps likes her. She might even go to the lengths of asking her mother one day, Martha, do you think that Archie McDougall is fond of me?

But you see it's not until Archie McDougall actually comes out with it and says to her one day, my sweetest Gertie, you are the Mona Lisa and the Venus de Milo incorporated into one delectable frame.

Actually, that's not quite how I put it when I came to that moment. Maybe not all of us do, but you know what I'm talking about, don't you? The declaration of love, the moment when he says that he loves her and the cat is out of the bag.

Now, has God declared his love to the world? People look around at the world and they say, it's such a horrible, difficult place. If God really loves the world, why are things as they are?

Has God declared his love? And if so, how? Well, 1 John 3, 16 is God's declaration of love. This is how we know love, that he laid down his life for us.

[21 : 43] That is the Bible's declaration of God's love. Now, the way John puts it here in verse 16 shows that this is not simply a revelation of love to be admired, it's an example of love to be copied.

That's why he goes on in the verse, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. He then gives just one example of what he means in verse 17.

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? Now, that's a challenge to all Christians, whether you have much money or just a little bit of money.

To those who earn big bucks, if you like, and those who have only a few pound coins to rub together. In one sense, we can never lay down our life exactly as Jesus did for the simple reason that his death was unique in its sin bearing character and its power to reconcile God and sinners.

But in another sense, John is calling us to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters again and again and again. so the character of the one who loves is marked by self-sacrifice.

[22 : 56] Do you ever get that feeling that you just love to escape and live in a very quiet corner of the world without those pressures of needing to look after others and care for them? I think all Christians sometimes feel like that.

If only I could retire to sky and plant potatoes and live a very quiet life. I sometimes think that. But that's no route for the Christian to take. The Lord God keeps sending us back again and again and again to our brothers and sisters that we should care for them and love doing so and delight in looking after them and laying down our lives for them.

Now let me try to apply this in a few very practical areas of Christian living. I think I've got four categories. I'll try and be quite brief on these. First, loving the brothers will mean taking an active interest in everybody else who belongs to the fellowship, to the church.

There can be a certain temptation at the end of a Sunday service or the end of another meeting of the church. The temptation is simply to relate to the people that you feel most comfortable with.

Do you know that moment? We'll come to it in about 20 minutes time, 15 minutes time, when we've had the last hymn and the last prayer has been said and the organ begins to play something quietly and we look up. And the question is, who are we going to talk to now for the next 5 or 10 or 15 minutes?

[24 : 15] The easy thing is always to gravitate to those that we know best and then certain people can get left out. So that decision, it takes place almost unconsciously, doesn't it, in the twinkling of an eye.

The easy thing is always to go to those that we feel that we can talk to most. And we have to make more effort with those that we don't know so well and therefore it's more of a self-sacrifice to speak to somebody like that.

Any church, even the best of churches, will always tend towards a certain cliquishness. But those who love their brothers and sisters are always going to be working against that tendency to be cliquish and that will mean that the quieter folk, the less confident folk in the fellowship are not left out but rather are encouraged and valued.

So taking an active interest in everyone else who belongs to the church, that's part of loving our brothers and sisters. And that includes the children. Sometimes adults who stand this high and children being down there, the adults can almost not notice the children.

But the children are very important. It's lovely, isn't it, when you see some older member of the church bending down and looking into the eyes of a little child and talking to them with real love and seriousness. It's part of building up the fellowship.

[25 : 28] So there's the first thing. Secondly, loving the brothers will mean working hard at building up relationships where there may have been difficulties. I guess there are folk in, if you belong to this church for a long time, there may well be one or two or three or four folk that you might sometimes want to steer clear of, not because you don't know them, but because there's been some kind of disagreement in the past.

Relationships have been strained. It could be over a big thing like doctrine or a point of ethics. It could be over some very trivial practicality, such as somebody forgetting to come to a meeting or failing to fix up the crash rotor or something like that.

I can think of a dreadful moment when one of my sons was a toddler. I'm about 18 months old. I was the vicar of a parish down in England. And at the end of this particular Sunday service, my little son, just walking, went up to a little baby who was in a buggy at the back of the church and scratched that baby's face and the blood ran.

Can you imagine what I felt like? There was a bit of patching up of relationships to be done. The parents were terribly nice about it. But can you imagine what they said to their friends when they went home?

The vicar and his family, they were so welcoming to us. Loving the brothers, it's going to mean that a strained relationship, if there are any strained relationships, we don't allow that sort of thing to fester.

[26 : 51] But we take active steps to rebuild loving, positive, glad friendship. Then thirdly, loving the brothers will mean being at church meetings.

Being at church meetings. It's such an elementary thing. But it does need to be said. In fact, it is said loud and clear in Hebrews 10.25, where the writer says, let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.

The Lord put that verse into Hebrews because he knows that given half a chance, we will stop coming to meetings of the church. I don't know whether you know the story of the Sunday morning conversation between the mother who was cooking the breakfast downstairs and the son, who was still lying in bed, upstairs.

And the conversation ran like this. The mother shouts up the stairs, son, get up now, it's time for breakfast. The son replies from his bed, oh, mother, don't bother me.

I'm enjoying a lie-in. Ten minutes later, the mother shouts again, son, I can hear the church bells ringing. Get up at once. Oh, mother, comes the reply, I'll get up if you can give me two good reasons why I should.

[28 : 08] Mother replies, all right, here they are. First, you're 47 years old, and second, you're the vicar of the church. Now, let me assure you, friends, it is easier if you're the vicar or the minister.

You've got to be there. There's no question, is there, at 8 o'clock in the morning as to whether you're going to get there or not. But the one who loves the brothers and sisters goes to the fellowship, to the meetings, not just so as to be himself encouraged and fed and taught, but in order to encourage and enthuse the others.

We are each other's responsibility to keep one another going as Christians, gently loving each other, keeping in touch with each other, and helping one another along. Now, fourthly, loving the brothers involves giving them your time, your money, and your hospitality.

Time and money and hospitality. I'll tell you when, in the course of my life, I've found it most hard to give time to love the brothers and sisters. This perhaps refers more to the time when I was a vicar down in England.

But imagine me, it's a Saturday afternoon in February or March. Does that mean anything to anybody? It's perhaps about 3 o'clock in the afternoon and I'm watching the television. England are playing in the Six Nations Championship.

[29 : 25] And it's just getting to that point when the English, we haven't done very well in the last year or two, as friends of mine will remind me after the service. But we just get to that point in the rugby match where the English are piling on the pressure and the people wearing the shirts of another colour, which you can imagine what other colour it would be.

But they're going back and the white jerseys are piling forward and just at that moment, when a glorious try is about to be scored, the telephone rings. So I drag myself out of the chair and pick up the phone.

Is that the vicar? Yes. Oh, it's Theodosia Birtwistle here, vicar. Have you got a few minutes to talk to me, vicar? Yes, I have Theodosia.

Of course, go ahead. Oh, I'm so glad I've not disturbed you at a difficult time, vicar. I just wanted to tell you how I got on at the hospital yesterday when I went to see the Veruca specialist.

Now, if you can give Theodosia Birtwistle ten minutes over her Veruccas when England are just developing a purple patch of rugby when they're playing Wales, you are learning how to love, aren't you?

[30 : 34] But you see, you must do it. You must do it. Because Theodosia's Veruccas really are much more important than the rugby scoreline. Loving others by giving them money.

money. That can make British folk feel uncomfortable for all sorts of complicated social reasons. But that is the one specific example that John gives here in verse 17.

In our British churches with an annual turnover of many thousands, hundreds of thousands of pounds, it would be a scandal, wouldn't it, if a true brother or sister lacked food or clothing.

And if our complicated Britishness means that we can't give money openly to brothers or sisters, why not stick some banknotes in a brown envelope without marks on it and slip it through the letterbox at midnight.

However it's done, it needs to be done. And equally, of course, we need to work out our responsibilities to Christians overseas. Sacrificial giving. That's the giving of verse 17.

[31 : 35] A gift of ten pounds from a really poor person can be a much more sacrificial gift than a gift of a thousand pounds from somebody who has a lot of money. Or think of hospitality.

They say south of the border that an Englishman's home is his castle. I don't know what they say north of the border. There are plenty of castles up here. But an Englishman, once he's converted, needs to drop his castle mentality and open his doors and welcome his brothers and sisters to care for them in his home.

The old saying is that the last part of a person to be converted is his pocket. And while that may be true in many cases, I think for some people it can be the attitude to one's own home.

Some folk greatly value their home privacy and feel that opening their home to others can be a kind of violation almost. It can be a real tussle for some Christians.

But the example in verse 16 is that Jesus laid down his life for us. So friends, loving the brothers and sisters, that is the second mark that John the Apostle gives us of the real Christian.

[32 : 45] The goal of the one who loves is eternal life. The character of the one who loves is that of self-sacrifice. Loving our brothers and sisters will involve taking an active interest in everybody else who belongs to the fellowship, working at building up relationships where some shadow may have crossed them, being at church meetings, being together as much as possible, and giving freely of our time, our money, and our hospitality.

Is this all a very tall order? Yes, it is. It's a gloriously tall order. But John the Apostle knows that it is possible for people to live like this, who truly have the seed of God's new life growing and working within them.

So, to spur us on, he says in verse 18, little children let us not love in words or talk, but in deed and in truth. And to reassure us, he says in verse 14, we know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the the brothers.

Well, let's bow our heads and we'll ask the Lord to help us to grow in our love for each other. Our dear Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for teaching John the Apostle these fundamentally important things and for his message to us.

because though he is dead, he still speaks to us through these powerful words. And we pray, dear Father, that because we are weak and naturally self-centered, you will stir us up to love more freely, more generously, more joyously, more wholeheartedly.

[34 : 40] And we pray that love for the brothers and sisters will be a growing mark of our fellowship in this coming year. And we ask it in Jesus Christ's name.

Amen.