

# **1 JOHN**

Part 7: “The Radical Way of Love”

1 John 3:11–24a

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## **Scripture Reading**

*“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. 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 the 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. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him.” (1 John 3:11–24a).*

## **Prayer**

Almighty and Everlasting God, thank you that your word reveals your love for us. As you have loved us, may your Spirit empower us to love one another. And as we love one another and those around us, help us reveal the love of Christ, your Son, to a watching world. In Christ’s name we pray, AMEN.

## **Introduction**

Have you ever wondered how truly astonishing it is that the early Christian movement grew the way that it did?

In the first three centuries, Christians possessed virtually no political power. Churches had no massive budgets. And being a Christian came with virtually no social benefits or privileges. In fact, during this time, Christians often endured great social pressure and persecution. Some Christians were even martyred for their loyalty to Jesus. Many others were literally driven underground to gather and worship and pray in secret.

Nevertheless, by the end of the first century, Christians worldwide numbered in the thousands. By the end of the second century, Christians worldwide numbered in the hundreds of thousands. By the end of the third century, Christians worldwide numbered in the millions. And by the fourth century, the same Roman empire that once crucified Jesus of Nazareth had been effectively conquered by the faith that bore Jesus's name.

What could possibly account for this massively exponential growth?

The late sociologist and Baylor professor Rodney Stark explored that very question in his book *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. In this scholarly work, Stark argues that the early Christians stood out in the ancient world in large part because of how well they loved each other, as well as those who were outside of their fellowship.

For example, in ancient Roman society, when plagues would break out in a sizeable metropolitan city, the afflicted were often abandoned by their own family members who fled from the city and into the countryside. But Christians refused to leave and forsake one another. Instead, they cared for one another. And, at great risk to their own health, they would even care for those outside of their community who were sick and abandoned.

Christian's tangible acts of charity, care for the sick and marginalized, and willingness to provide social support created a strong sense of community that simply was not found anywhere else.

Simply said, the radical way that the early Christians loved one another and their neighbors made the gospel of Jesus Christ unignorable to the world around them. And as a result, more people came to know Jesus, follow Jesus, worship Jesus, and walk in the way of Jesus.

In today's Scripture reading, Apostle John is reminding his readers of the crucial importance of love within the Christian life. Remember, he is writing this letter that we now call 1 John to a community of Christians that has been recently discouraged by division. They live at a time when false teachers are spreading a lot of confusion about the truth of Christ. And they are on the threshold of a moment in history when Christians will soon be persecuted for their faith.

There is so much to worry about and be concerned about, but in this moment, John wants them to focus on what is fundamental, foundational, and vital to their faith. But,

in this passage, he will not astonish his readers with some newfound revelation that they have never heard or considered before. Instead, he will remind them: *“For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another”* (1 John 3:11).

So, for the rest of our time today, let's delve into this text together to see what we can learn about *“The Radical Way of Love”* that we are called to believe and live and practice as followers of Jesus.

As we walk through this passage, we will divide our discussion into three big ideas: *1.) The Opposite of Love, 2.) The Standard of Love, and 3.) The Evidence of Love.*

## **Exposition**

### **1) The Opposite of Love**

Before we know what love *is*, we have to know what it is *not*. So John is going to give us what is called a negative example that illustrates the exact opposite of the way of love. And the example he provides comes from the ancient story of Cain.

John writes: *“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”* (1 John 3:12).

The story of Cain goes back to the early chapters of Genesis. Genesis is the first book of the Bible that tells us about the beginning of creation, the beginning of humanity, and the beginning of all suffering and sorrow that flow from the introduction of sin into the world.

God creates the heavens and the earth and humanity in a state of perfection and harmony, but sin fractures the goodness of creation. And the early half of Genesis records how the power of sin seeks to unravel the order and beauty of creation into chaos and death.

That is where Cain enters the story. Cain is the first son of Adam and Eve and the first human to be born into a world broken by sin. And as the first person born into a sin-fractured world, Cain personifies the death and destruction that sin brings.

Cain has a little brother named Abel, and Genesis 4 describes how both Cain and Abel make sacrifices as a way to worship God. Abel sacrifices his first and his best to the Lord (c.f. Heb 11:4); it is a sacrifice that expresses sincere reverence and dependence upon the Lord. Cain, on the other hand, makes a perfunctory sacrifice of half-hearted devotion and self-interest. God receives and blesses Abel's sacrifice. But he rejects the sacrifice of Cain.

So Cain's heart burns with hatred and rage toward his little brother. God even warns Cain, that the power of sin is eager to consume and overtake him. But Cain resists God's warning. Instead, Cain rises up and kills his own brother [show [1Cain Mosaic](#)]. And as a result of this murder, the ground that receives Abel's blood cries out to God and Cain is sent into endless exile.

For the Apostle John, Cain is not just a villain from an ancient story. Cain embodies the way of life that Christians must actively avoid. And you might be tempted to say, "Well, good news, I'm not a murderer. I haven't killed anybody, so I should be good to go!"

Not so fast.

The same power of sin that sought to devour Cain still tempts us and whispers to us every day. Like Cain, we are lured toward hate, and we often feel justified in our hate. And like Cain, our lack of love for others comes from a disordered love for ourselves.

The very name "Cain" (קַיִן) derives from a word (קָנִיתִי) that means "I get, I consume, I acquire." Cain's identity is an assertion of self-will; he is a man who will do anything to get what he wants.

So too, Cain is the part of us that is self-focused, self-absorbed, and self-worshipping. Cain is the impulse within us to indulge our every appetite and despise anything or anyone that would get in our way. Cain is the way of life that cannot stand others getting attention or praise and instead is filled with envy, jealousy, and hatred toward another person's joy or success. Cain is what happens when we have been so consumed by the power of sin that all our love is curved only *inward toward self*—never outward to others or upward toward God.

Cain's perspective has been so twisted that he cannot see the life of his own brother as something that is holy and sacred. When he looks at his brother, he no longer sees a person made in the image of God. He only sees a despised obstacle between him and his desire. And Cain's hatred is the spark that explodes into a fire of violence and murder.

When we look at Cain, we need to see a warning for our own hearts. Do you allow your heart to nurse unrestrained envy or hate? Do you ever wound others through your words or your actions? Are you willing to inflict pain to exert your will?

That way of life is the way of Cain. And it is the way of life that has led to all violence, all murder, and all war. You see, the story of Cain isn't just one episode of ancient history. The story of Cain is human history.

A few years back, Darren Aronofsky directed a film about the biblical story of Noah. Truth be told, I found it to be a pretty disappointing film. But there was one scene that was truly incredible. It is the scene when Noah recounts the story of Cain and Abel [show [2Aronofsky's Depiction of Cain](#)].

As Noah narrates the famous tale, there is an image of Cain rising up to kill his brother. But then that image shifts into a montage of warriors from every human culture and era of history re-enacting the same violence over and over again [show [3Aronofsky Cain GIF](#)].

In this way, Aronofsky's film displays the same truth that John has written. Cain's murder represents all murder. His hatred is all hatred. And the way of Cain has left a wake of pain, bloodshed, death, and exile all across time.

The people of God must actively resist the way of Cain, even when it is costly, even if it means enduring hatred of the world. John writes, *"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. 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"* (1 John 3:13–15).

John reminds us that to name, expose, and oppose the way of Cain will often provoke outrage from a world that is fueled by hate. But he is also reminding us that we are not of the world. For those in Christ, we have come out of death and into life!

We are called to a different way than the way of Cain. We are called to the better way of Christ. Indeed, we are to display to the world a new way of being human that is impossible outside of Jesus Christ.

## 2) **The Standard of Love**

Often, people define love by whatever definition of love that is floating around in the ever-changing winds of the surrounding culture. We might envision love as romantic attraction or powerful feelings. At a social level, we might define love as fighting for a certain political or public cause.

In the same way, we often define love based on our own personal experiences or family of origin. Maybe your personal background would form you to envision love as what others might call enmeshment or unhealthy co-dependence. Others might view love as a cold relational bond defined by distance, detachment, and indifference. Maybe you would be tempted to look at love as a somewhat tense transaction of benefits that sounds like, *"If you do this for me, then I will do this for you. But watch out; because if you fail, I'm keeping score."*

In today's text, John tells us that if we are to understand love, we must not look at our collective culture or our individual experience—we must look to the true standard of love. He writes, *"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us..."* (1 John 3:16a).

The truest love that ever was or will be is Jesus Christ dying on the cross for you and me.

Jesus Christ is Lord and God. He is the eternal word of God made human flesh. He has existed in perfect glory and majesty from before creation and time.

Yet, Jesus loved us so much that he drew near to us in our brokenness and shame. He embraced our humanity, our frailty, and our pain. And he died in pain and humiliation on a wooden cross to take the penalty for our sins and defeat the power of death.

Even more astonishing is that he did not die for us while we were good and godly. No, he died for us while we were still sinners and his enemies (c.f. Rom 5:8, 10).

Can you see now how Christ is the perfect inverse of Cain? Cain murdered his brother. But Jesus was murdered for the sake of his brothers. The blood that was shed by Cain cried out from the ground for justice. But the blood of Christ, shed on the cross, “speaks a better word” (Heb 12:24), and cries out for redemption and grace.

So, if you want to look at the opposite of love, look to Cain.

If you want to know the true essence of love, look to the cross of Christ.

The cross of Christ shows us that love is not easy and convenient; it is costly and challenging. The cross of Christ shows us that love is not indifferent and distant; it is passionate and vulnerable and draws near. The cross of Christ shows us that love is not transactional; it is self-giving, sacrificial, and generous.

Jesus Christ did not die for you because he found you perfect. He died because his love *makes you* perfect. All we have to do is trust in who Christ is and what he has done to experience the saving power of his love. And you can trust in Christ today!

But the love of Christ on the cross is meant to be far more than just an ideal that is worthy of our admiration. It is signpost to a way of life that is worthy of our *imitation*. That is why 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*” (1 John 3:16).

God has given his people a supernatural love, an extravagant love, and an overflowing love from God, and now it must be given to others. And throughout the centuries, Christians have expressed love in two ways—in word and in deed.

In word, we go forth to tell people about Jesus. We share the story of who Christ is, what he has done, and how through his gospel we can come to know and experience the very love of God. We proclaim the good news so that people can be liberated from fear, guilt, shame, and unforgiveness by trusting in Christ.

But John wants us to know that just as Christ's love was tangible and real, so too the people of God are to love in ways that are tangible and real. He writes: “*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" (1 John 3:17–18).*

What John is saying here would deeply challenge many American Christians today. He is saying *mere evangelism is an incomplete expression of God's love*. We are to love with our actions, our deeds, and our resources.

It's not a surprise then that within the first few chapters of the book of Acts, the early Christians establish a place where the hungry could come to eat food. So too, within a few more centuries, the Christian movement would birth the first hospitals where the sick and injured could receive healing and care. They create the first orphanages to house children whose parents had died or abandoned them. They found the first schools and universities that provided education for common people, not just the wealthy and powerful.

Now, we must understand that the needs of the world are much bigger than the capacity of any one Christian or any one congregation. But we should always be challenged to ask: how have you been providentially positioned or resourced to tangibly display the love of Christ to those around you? How might the Holy Spirit be leading you to love in deed and in truth in specific ways?

### **3) The Evidence of Love**

Up to this point, we know what love is and is not. The final question we must answer is how do we know that we have truly known the love of God?

It's not an unreasonable question to ask. Perhaps, you have experienced seasons of spiritual sorrow and dryness. Perhaps you have felt like a failure or unloved by God. Perhaps you have gone through severe moments of doubt and wondered if you're really a Christian.

And I want you to know even if all you have is a tiny *mustard seed* of trust in Christ, you are saved. It's not the strength of your faith that saves you. It is the *object* of your faith that saves you—and Jesus is strong enough to hold you. There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1). That declaration is real regardless of how you feel.

But with that said, it sure does help to *feel* reassured that we truly love God, and God truly loves us. In other words, sometimes our minds already know the truth of God's love, but our hearts need persuading.

Here John makes a fascinating point. He reminds us that in loving one another, we are keeping the commands of God and practicing righteousness. When we love one another, we are abiding in Christ and participating in the very life of Jesus.

John writes, “*By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him* (1 John 3:19–24a).

In other words, we can be confident that Christ’s love is at work *within* us when we witness Christ’s love is moving *through* us.

It’s like walking into a dark room of an empty building and flipping a switch to see if the electricity is working. So too, our acts of love are not what save us. But our acts of love can provide encouraging evidence that God’s saving power is truly at work in our lives.

In other words, when we walk in love as Christ has commanded us to love, we are only displaying the love of Christ to a watching world. We are also displaying the love of Christ to our own anxious hearts that need to experience the blessing of assurance.

## **Conclusion**

We live in a very loud cultural moment filled with constant news, social media, and entertainment. And in the midst of this noise, marketers and advertisers work very hard to make commercials that might pierce through the ocean of shouting voices.

In this environment, it would be tempting to think that the church had better increase its advertising budget. Christians should hire better marketers and buy better ad-time if we want to stay relevant.

In fact, just this year, there was a \$100 million dollar advertising campaign launched during the Super Bowl that sought to bring attention to Jesus and the saving message of the gospel.

And while I truly appreciate the motive behind this effort, I think 1 John reminds us that the most powerful and compelling advertisement that the gospel could ever have is Christians who actually love the way God has called us to love.

In fact, before followers of Jesus were ever known as Christians, they had another name. They were known as people who belonged to “*The Way*.” The early Christians were known for the way is the radical way of love, the way of Jesus himself, the way of the cross.

And it is for this reason that I am often so very thankful for the people of this church. Even though we are only a congregation of a few hundred people when we gather on a Sunday, you would not believe the profound and consistent ways that the people of



Redeemer have been able to walk in the way of love for the sake of those in need in our community and in the world around us.

I think of the way Betty Reyes-Medina spent hours of her time calmly serving the many refugees in Amarillo who were displaced by the recent floods. I think of Keith Pace who last week sent a refrigerated truck filled with food and supplies to the Tornado-stricken community of Perryton. I think of Ryan Rush's ophthalmic surgery ministry that just completed its first medical mission trip to the nation of Congo, after doing the same work for years in places like Mexico and Nicaragua. I think of Frank and Sunny Ratliff, who donated a water well for people in a drought-parched region of Kenya. And those are just a few examples of things a few of Redeemer's people have done *this month*—a month that hasn't even ended yet.

People of God, the love of God is at work within you and through you!

We know that we cannot heal all brokenness or right all wrongs. That is why we yearn for Christ to return and make all things new.

But as citizens of God's kingdom, we have the opportunity to work towards a more compassionate world, a more just world, a more beautiful world, a world that is more in step with the reality of God and the perfect kingdom Christ is bringing. So to love in deed and in truth is not a burden—it is our birthright.

So Redeemer Christian Church, may we be emissaries of Christ's love with our words. May we embody his love in our lives. And may we be emboldened to walk in the radical way of love for the sake of the one who loved us and laid down his life for our sake!

AMEN.

### **Gospel Community Discussion Starters**

- 1) Read 1 John 3:11–24a out loud.
- 2) How does the story of Cain serve as a negative example of love, and how can we avoid falling into this pattern?
- 3) Why is it important to look to the ultimate standard of love, Jesus Christ, rather than defining love based on cultural or personal experiences?
- 4) How does the way of the cross exemplify the essence of love, and in what ways does it differ from the way of Cain?
- 5) What does it mean to love in deed and in truth?
- 6) How can we reassure our hearts that we have truly known the love of God, especially during seasons of doubt or spiritual dryness?

### **Gospel Community Discussion Starters (Discovery Bible Study Method)**

- 1) Read 1 John 3:11–24a out loud.
- 2) What does this passage say about God, Jesus or his plan?
- 3) What does this passage reveal about humans?
- 4) According to this passage, what are you doing well?
- 5) According to this passage, what do you need to change?