

## THAT YOU MAY KNOW: A STUDY OF FIRST JOHN

### LESSON 10: “Assurance and the Lifestyle of Love”

TEXT: 1 John 3:11–24

One of the most sobering takeaways from the account of the fall of Adam and Eve is the speed at which sin left its indelible mark on the human race. Immediately following the account of original sin in Genesis 3, the next sin described is in the very next section of narrative, Genesis 4. In fact, that sin was so astounding that it has become the most infamous account of *fratricide* in human history—the murder of Abel by his brother Cain.

Certainly, Genesis 4 begins with the glimmer of hope: “Now the man [Adam] had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, ‘I have gotten a manchild with *the help of the Lord*’” (4:1). In response to their sin, Adam and Eve had been given a promise that from Eve would one day come a descendent—a “seed”—who would crush the serpent’s head (Gen 3:15). Eve wondered whether her first child was that seed: “I have gotten a manchild with *the help of the Lord*.” The following verses indicate that was not the case. In fact, that first child would come to be known throughout history for something much different:

So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruit of the ground. Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not *your countenance* be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.” Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” And he said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” He said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to Me from the ground. (Genesis 4:2–10).

At that very early moment of history, the idea and experience of murder entered the world. It was not an accidental killing, but a premeditated and envy-inspired slaying of an unsuspecting and innocent *brother*. As a result, the name “Cain” is forever remembered as the antithesis of *brotherly love*.

#### 1 John 3:11–24 – “Assurance and the Lifestyle of Love”

It is with this antithesis in mind that the apostle John begins the next section of his letter as he writes to provide his readers with confidence in their salvation (see 1 John 5:13). John states,

For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; not as Cain, *who* was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother’s were righteous. Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who 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. We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. 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 the things that are pleasing in His sight. (1 John 3:11–24)

This is not the first time that John has pointed to *brotherly love* as proof that one possesses eternal life. John first established this connection in 2:7–11. Moreover, in the closing sentence to the section preceding 3:11–24, John indicated that he was about to return to this topic: “By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, **nor the one who does not love his brother**” (3:10). In other words, through his repeated emphasis on *loving one another* John wanted his readers to recognize that their practical, selfless love for each other was one of the overwhelming indicators that they were truly saved. While false teachers were questioning their salvation and pointing to their own

secret tests to discern whether these Christians belonged to God or not, the apostle John emphasizes this very simple and straightforward evidence: *that you love each other in practical, yet sacrificial ways is an overwhelming proof that you are saved.*

As he does elsewhere in his letter, John advances his argument in 3:11–24 by asserting his premise (v. 11), then by moving back and forth between negative and positive descriptions of this premise (vv. 12–22), and then by asserting his premise once again (vv. 23–24). Fundamental to John’s argument is the understanding that the human race is comprised of two fundamental categories of people: (1) those who are of the devil and who therefore have no love; and (2) those who are born of God and who demonstrate love through their lifestyle.

Recognizing John’s approach of comparison and contrast, our survey of the passage will not work strictly verse-by-verse through the text but will categorize **what John has to say about the *absence of love* (what is true of unbelievers), and what John has to say about the *practice of love* (what is true of believers).**

## I. The Necessity of Love Asserted (3:11)

First, we must consider John’s premise in v. 11. He begins the passage with the conjunction **“For,”** making an deliberate connection between what he just stated in v. 10 and what will follow in vv. 11–24. Just prior to v. 11, John wrote, **“By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother” (v. 10).** As John now moves into the next section of the letter, he builds upon this assertion in v. 10 about the two categories of *spiritual identity* (“children of God” or “children of the devil”) and how one’s standing with respect to the love of one’s brother determines the category to which one belongs.

John describes what he is about to say as the **“message you have heard from the beginning.”** This **“beginning”** refers to the moment of his readers’ *conversion*—the moment when they were *born again*. By describing the **“message”** as something heard all the way back at this pivotal moment in time, John emphasizes the message’s *unchanging nature* and its *utmost priority* in the Christian life. What was that message? John states it directly: **“that we should love one another.”** Clearly, the command to love is not a later or optional addition to the Christian life. It was a fundamental truth that was taught immediately upon conversion. Moreover, that this love was to be expressed to **“one another”** indicates the impartial and unqualified exercise of this love. It was to be a continuous pattern of life, wherein members of the church mutually sought the welfare of each other. It was expected of *all believers without exception*—even from John himself (note the **“we”** in v. 11). The command wasn’t limited in application to only certain segments of the church. It was required of all and for all. (Read John 13:34–35; 15:12, 17; 1 John 2:7–11; 4:7, 11–12; also Romans 13:8–10; 1 Thessalonians 4:9.)

But what kind of **“love”** is this? John Piper has a helpful response: “Selfishness seeks its own private happiness at the expense of others. Love seeks its happiness in the happiness of the beloved. It will even suffer and die for the beloved in order that its joy might be full in the life and purity of the beloved” (*Desiring God*, 176).

## II. The Absence of Love Denounced (3:12, 13, 14b–15, 17)

After asserting the necessity of a lifestyle of love for those who are children of God (v. 11), John contrasts this lifestyle with the lifestyle of those who belong to the evil one. In the sentences that follow, *four observations* can be found about those who are empty of such love.

**A. The Quintessential Offender (v. 12).** The quintessential example of the absence of love is none other than **“Cain.”** John’s mention of Cain is a little unexpected at this point in the letter. In fact, John’s mention of Cain is the only direct reference to the OT that he makes in his entire letter. But the reference to Cain is certainly logical. Cain’s commission of *fratricide* proved to everyone that he was **“of the evil one.”** Who could deny that? But John wants his readers to think further, and so he asks the question: **“for what reason did he slay him?”** The issue was *motive*, not just externals. Cain didn’t *become* evil because he murdered Abel. He murdered because he *was* evil. He murdered because he had no love. His “fruits” demonstrated his “roots.”

- B. The Universal Reality (v. 13).** Based on the actions of the first naturally born man, Cain, we should not be surprised about the absence of love among Cain’s descendants. Instead, we should expect that **“the world hates”** as a way of life. But the world’s hatred—like Cain’s hatred of righteous Abel (see Hebrews 11:4)—is especially directed to those who are children of God. (Read Matthew 5:11–12; John 15:18–25.)
- C. The Unmistakable Conclusion (vv. 14b–15).** John first describes a crime of *omission*—the passive failure to love: **“He who does not love abides in death.”** This failure to love is not a sporadic failure, but descriptive of a *habit of life*. Wherever this habit exists, one can conclude confidently that such a one remains in *spiritual deadness* (Eph 2:1), mastered by sin, a slave to the evil one, having no saving knowledge of God (John 17:3).
- John then describes a crime of *commission*—the active exercise of hatred: **“Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer.”** As Jesus Himself taught (Matt 5:21–22), hatred should not be treated lightly just because it is not acted upon. It is *murder in the heart* no less than lust is *adultery in the heart* (Matt 5:27–28). Again, Cain didn’t murder by accident. It was the outcome of a *hidden motive*—hatred. Whether one acts upon it or not, such hatred gives powerful testimony to the lack of salvation—despite what that one professes to believe.
- D. The Practical Test (v. 17).** As his final observation about the absence of love, John takes the discussion out of the abstract and applies it to a practical illustration: one’s response to a brother in need. Ultimately, actual murder is not the only basis upon which to identify an unbeliever. Murderous thoughts are not the only basis either. When one, as a practice of life, **“closes his heart against [his brother in need],”** it can be assumed that such a one is barren of the life and love of God.

### III. The Practice of Love Extolled (3:14a, 16, 18, 19–22)

In 1 John 3:12–22, John also provides statements—*four observations*—about the lifestyle of love that characterizes those born of God.

- A. The Reassuring Witness (v. 14a).** John asserts that the believer’s new disposition to seek the benefit (the “happiness”) of other Christians—even at personal cost—is to be regarded as a primary indicator of eternal life. John states it emphatically: **“We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren.”** Although many Christians seek dramatic emotional experiences as the substantiation of their profession of faith, John points to something practical: *one’s love of his brothers*. Those truly born of God *automatically* begin to love others born of God.
- B. The Supreme Example (v. 16).** Furthermore, the believer’s instinct to love his brother is fostered by what his Savior has done for him. John again refers to the atonement of Jesus Christ—to His shedding of blood on the cross to propitiate the sins of all who would believe (1 John 1:9; 2:2). **“We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”** All who have been truly redeemed by Jesus Christ have come to know His marvelous, deep, unmerited love for them. This love is at the very heart of the gospel. Consequently, it serves as the catalyst to mimic this same kind of love for all those whom Christ has so loved. He who loves Christ cannot hate those who belong to Him. (Read John 10:1–18, especially noting vv. 11, 14–15, and 17–18; read John 15:12–14.)
- C. The Necessary Qualification (v. 18).** John takes the discussion from the abstract to the practical. In contrast to the world (which at best loves superficially; see v. 17), John reminds his readers that their love is of a different kind. It is an *applied* love. Providing another affirmation of his confidence in their faith, he addresses them as **“Little children.”** He then reiterates the message they had heard from the beginning of their new life in Christ, applying the standard to himself as well: **“let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth” (v. 18).** In other words, Christian love is expressed in action.
- D. The Beneficial Effects (vv. 19–22).** On the one hand, it appears as though John digresses in vv. 19–22 to talk about matters of the conscience and of prayer. But a careful study of the language of these verses indicates that they continue John’s instruction about love—specifically, by identifying several of love’s *benefits*.

The first beneficial effect of a lifestyle of love is the help it offers when a believer falters in his assurance of salvation (vv. 19–20). John begins by stating **“We will know by this that we are of the truth”**—a reference to loving “in deed and truth” (end of v. 18). In other words, our practical, sincere expressions of love for each other are to give us confidence that we are **“of the truth”** and not “of the evil one” (see v. 12). John further acknowledges that this practical lifestyle of love helps override internal doubts and fears: **“and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us.”** John is not calling upon us to harden our consciences against known sin. Instead, recognizing that our internal impulses are fallible and not capable of rendering final judgment, he exhorts us to assuage our insecure hearts by looking to the practical evidence of our expressions of love for each other (“fruits” reveal “roots”). In fact, John reminds us that **“God is greater than our heart and knows all things”**—a frightening statement to one in secret rebellion, but a comforting reality to the true believer. (For an example of this, see Peter’s expression in John 21:15–17.)

The second beneficial effect of a lifestyle of love is that it lends confidence to our prayers (vv. 21–22). John again addresses his readers with a word of confidence: **“Beloved.”** He then goes on to state **“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 the things that are pleasing in His sight.”** John returns to the standard stated at the end of v. 18—of loving “in deed and truth.” As we obey the commandment to “love one another” and increasingly please God in the process, we are to gain assurance and alleviate the fears of our hearts. As that worry of being “of the evil one” and not “born of God” dissipates, we come to have increased confidence to enter God’s presence with our prayers. Contrary to the fear harbored in the heart by many believers, God *loves* to have His children come to Him with all of their needs.

#### IV. The Necessity of Love Reasserted (3:23–24)

**“This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us” (3:23–24).**

#### For Discussion

1. In 1 John 3:23, John states that God’s commandment is “that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another.” But is it important not to confuse “love one another” with the message of the gospel itself. Why is the command to “love one another” distinct from and subsequent to the command to “believe in the name of Jesus Christ”?
2. In your own words, define what biblical love is. How do you distinguish it from worldly love?
3. Describe to the men in your group the ways that you are currently serving in the church. Then read 1 Corinthians 13:1–3. What would your service look like without love? Would it look any different than it does now? What would it look like if it was motivated with greater love? What can you do to grow in that area?
4. John wants his readers to grow in assurance as they recognize in themselves the signs of “love for one another.” What have you noticed in your life, especially in response to 1 John 3:11–24, that helps foster your assurance?
5. Spend time considering the supreme example of love demonstrated by Jesus (1 John 3:16). Share with others your response to the simple yet profound phrase, “He laid down His life for us.” How does a refreshed view of Christ’s sacrifice for you give you new motivation to “lay down your lives for your brothers”?

#### For Further Study

1. **Memorize** 1 Corinthians 13:1–3.
2. **Sing** the hymn “Here Is Love” (*Hymns of Grace*, #185). The hymn wonderfully summarizes 1 John 3:16a.
3. **Read** the Puritan Paperback by Hugh Binning entitled *Christian Love*.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at [www.gracechurch.org/motw](http://www.gracechurch.org/motw).

Next meeting: February 4 – 6:15pm, Fellowship on the Patio; 7pm, Q & A with the Men of the Word elders