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On Loving the Brethren (pt. 1)

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1 John 3:11-15

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When I first came back to Ashland to begin the work of church planting, I thought long and hard about the topic for our first Bible study. Our plan was to meet for Bible study for a while before really launching, and I thought that the first series would really be symbolic. I wanted it to set the tone for who we were and what we were about as a church.

I ended up doing a series of studies on 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter. I even began the series by saying, "I want this topic to be our founding constitution. I want our church to be grounded in and known for its love."

Some of you might have thought that I would start with a study on the sovereignty of God or something really *Reformed*. We were determined to be a Reformed church after all. If I did that, it certainly would have been fine. But I wanted to stress another side

of Reformed theology. I wanted to stress the love that should characterize a truly Reformed church.

Today I want to do that with all of you. I want you to understand what we are called to as Christians. Being Reformed means nothing if we are cold and disinterested in one another. We can be as pure and clean in our doctrine as any of the greatest theologians, but if we lack love we have missed all the intent of Scripture.

John presses that upon us in the passage that is before us. Throughout this epistle he emphasizes the idea of loving one another. And in the passage before us, we have an extended discussion on it. Right here in the heart of his epistle as if to say, "The central focus of this book—the meat and core of what I want to communicate is this: You must love one another."

I believe the passage can be divided into three heads. In the first section he deals with some general principles having to do with our love for one another. Then he deals with the practice of loving one another. Then he wraps up the chapter by talking about the power of it.

I had every intention of dealing with the whole chapter today. But as I was preparing this morning, I found that my manuscript ran long. So I'm going to tear things down and just deal with verses 11-15.

So let's focus on the principles that John lays out in regards to this topic of loving the brethren. The first principle that I want us to be aware of is that this love for the brethren is commanded by Christ.

I. Love is commanded by Christ

This is exactly what is stated in verse 11. "For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another."

In other words, ever since you started running in Christian circles, this is the refrain that has been repeated

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over and over. You have been taught that you are to love each other. This is something that was handed to us through the apostolic teaching. Christ himself said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another." In another place he says, "These things I command you that you may love one another." And again, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for a friend."

These are just a couple statements that I came up with without much research. And it shows that loving one another is nothing other than a divine imperative.

However, we could go back even further. The text may suggest that this isn't referring to the beginning of your Christian walk or even since the time Christ walked the earth. In the next verse he cites Cain. So he may be saying, "This is the message that you have heard ever since the beginning of time."

This could be a way to interpret the verse. It is simply stressing that God's ways have never changed. Ever since the Garden of Eden God has commanded us to pour out our affection for one another.

I want to stress this. I don't think I need to spend a lot of time on this point. I believe we all know that we are commanded by Christ to love one another. But let this permeate your mind: We are under divine obligation to do this. Do not take that lightly.

Some of you might be in rebellion to God right now. You've been holding a grudge against someone who is sitting in this room. You might be one who has not been very loving towards another brother or sister in Christ. Your language and demeanor has been rather cold or stand off-ish. If that is the case, you need to recognize that you are breaking God's law, and you need to repent of that.

You are commanded by Christ to love that person. Don't think that this is something you can fudge on. When it comes to life in the body of Christ this isn't optional. You are not allowed to pick and choose who you love and who you don't. Christ commands you to love them. And so you must.

Again, I don't think I need to stress this too much. I think it is obvious that we are to love one another. There probably isn't anyone in the world who does not know that. Even the heretics would agree with me on this one.

The point of departure is found in the next verse. After John tells us that love is commanded by Christ, he shows us how love is contrasted with Cain.

II. Love is contrasted with Cain

Look at verse 12. Here we find another principle that should guide our understanding of our love for one another. He says, "We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother."

Now the original language here is interesting. It is a little difficult and the editors of our Bibles try to help us by putting a period after the 11th verse and starting verse 12 with a new sentence. However, the Greek does not have periods. All of them are inserted by our Bible translators to help us. So, technically, it could be read like this, "This is the message we have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, *not as Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother.*"

It could be one sentence like that. And verse 12 could be modifying verse 11. So it is telling us how our love should look. Or at least, how it shouldn't look.

It is my belief that John is saying that Cain thought he was doing the loving thing in murdering his brother. Now that sounds absolutely bizerk, I'm sure. But that seems to me to be the thrust of the passage. Cain was attempting to show love when he shed that blood.

Now certainly, this was a self-love that had captured his heart. The way he treated Able was a perverted kind of love. It was due to his love for himself, which clouded his love for his brother.

I think what is happening here is an echo of what we find in the book of Proverbs. In the Proverbs it says, "The love of the wicked is cruel." That is to say, since men are lead by their own thoughts and intentions, rather than the law of God, their love that they think they are showing ends up hurting people.

I remember a story about how a couple was cited for the way they treated their dog. The owners had indulged their chocolate lab's appetite so that it weighted well over 150 pounds. The thing had become so fat that it could barely walk. And when it did, it had to rest every few steps because it couldn't bear its own weight.

Now there is no doubt in my mind that these people thought they were good pet owners. They were just letting their little pooch eat all he wanted. But that is wicked. That is some sort of cruel and unusual punishment. That's not regarding the life of the beast. It is a violation of God's law. It is not treating your pet in accord with what God's word says about gluttony & proper health.

But you can think what was going through their minds, "*Awe, look at the little poochy eat. What a good boy!*"

The point is that there are different standards for love. And our love must be contrasted with the rule that



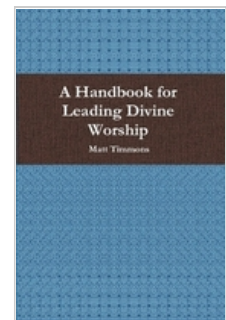
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Cain used. Our rule must be different than the world's. Our love must be governed by the law of God and not our own selfish and wayward intentions.

So remember that. As you love one another, make sure you are consulting the Scripture. Don't just think that you are doing someone a favor. Our love must be affectionate in that it is Christ centered love.

You could easily see someone here saying, "Well, that person wouldn't want me to talk to them anyway." Is that the way Christ tells us to treat each other? Of course not. Unless it is a petty thing that we should overlook, we are to go to them and settle our disputes. If we can't, we bring it to the elders. Christ lays out for us how we are to deal with the problems we have with one another. He shows us what love is. Anything else is hatred and murder.

Yes, that's right. It is murder. Look at verse 15. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer. John is reflecting the language of Jesus here. In the sermon on the Mount Jesus talks about how hatred is the root of murder. And to hate someone is to be a murderer at heart. It is to have a murderous spirit.

And, ultimately, it reveals our true status spiritually. And that gets to the last principle mentioned here. Love is not just commanded by Christ and contrasted with Cain. John also shows us that love is concentrated in true belief.

III. Love is concentrated in true Christians

He says in verse 14, "We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death." Then in verse 15 he says, "You know that no murderer has eternal life in him."

John's point here is that the mark of a true Christian is his love for the brethren. Love is concentrated in a Christian. His life will be one that displays kindness and shows tenderness to others who are aligned with Christ.

Of course, he is going to show love to everyone. That's obvious. A contrast is drawn here though. In the verse before John says that those who are decedents of Cain—those who are unregenerate and still under the power of Satan, will not have this spirit. Their tendency is to hate those who love Christ. They may never shed their blood, but they have that murderous spirit in that they don't have our welfare in mind. They would think it just the better if we didn't exist!

Not us though. If we really are a Christian, our lives will be marked by our love for one another.

As a matter of fact, this is one of the ways we can determine if we are a Christian or not. We've seen before that John gives us various tests whereby we can find out whether or not we are truly united to Christ. Here is the test of love for the brethren.

Are you struggling with assurance? Are you wondering if you are really a Christian? It is a common thing. I would say that the question enters our minds on occasion. If it is something you are dealing with, John says "Look at yourself." Look at your life and the way you are treating other Christians. Can you say you have an affection for them and that you are concerned for their welfare? This then may be the confirmation that you are needing.

I don't want to say much about this now. John returns to this thought later on in the passage. So I think it would be best to tackle that one later.

However, I would like to say this. Throughout the history of the church, this has been one reason people have stressed membership in a local church. Really, it has never been much of a question. It has always been assumed that you will associate with a church. But, logically speaking, if you are going to love the brethren it necessitates being associated with the brethren!

I say this because there is a widespread tendency today to be unaffiliated with a church. It is common for people to float from one church to another, we sometimes call it church-hopping. And there are others who have given up on church attendance altogether.

I understand why. There is a skepticism of authority that permeates our culture and a lot of people have had bad experiences with the church. And so people can be inclined to shy away from church membership and attendance.

I have seen this with a lot of people who are inclined towards home education too. After all, if there ever were people who were skeptical of governing authorities, its us!

But we should not let those things deter us from participation in a local church.

I understand that I am preaching to the choir. But I want to make sure the young people hear this. And you too, just in case you catch wind of this spirit that seems to be growing in many Christian circles.

It is imperative that we choose a God fearing church and remain committed to it as best we can. We are to

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be marked by our love for our brethren. And that necessitates regular interaction with the brethren. And the only way we can truly do that is through membership in a local church such as this.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, let me just say that this topic of loving the Brethren was so important that Francis Schaeffer said that it should be one of the distinctive marks of the true church.

Since the time of the Reformation theologians have said that the marks of the church are the pure preaching of the word, the right administration of the sacraments, and church discipline. They are right in saying that. When a church compromises those things, it ceases to be a true church of Christ.

But I think that Schaeffer was right too. Love is also that which distinguishes a true church of Christ. The preaching of the gospel is to move us to love. The sacraments show us what love is and remind us of our duty towards one another. And you discipline people because they are not being loving as they should.

You might say then that love is the chief mark of the church. It is the one to which all others point.

And so I will put the challenge to you. Christ's commandment could not be more clear. You must love one another. You must show the world that you are not of Cain's lineage. You must show the world that love really is concentrated in you.

So I will end where I began: Let love be the defining feature of this church. May you show the world that Love is the basis and constitution of this church.

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