

**Sermon File # 1048**

**Scripture Text: 1 John 3:11-18**

**Sermon Title: *Love Is Essential***

**Manuscript written and sermon preached by Roger Roberts**

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**Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.**

**Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.**

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## ***Love Is Essential***

### **Introduction:**

At least some of you students do not consider exams to be your favorite activity. And one of the annoying things about tests is they seem to happen so frequently. In his first letter, John returns to the same three tests by which we can assess the reality of our salvation—right belief about Christ, right moral behavior as God’s children, and genuine love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Although John returns to these topics, they are not simply repetitious. Rather, each time we look at one of these tests, “we look at it from a different point of view and are taken more deeply into it” (Wiersbe, 119).

In today’s text we come to another of John’s tests for the assurance of our salvation. Last Sunday we were given one of the apostle’s moral, behavioral tests that, if passed, give evidence that we are true believers (3:4-10). Today we return to the theme of love, which was John’s closing word in last week’s text (10). True children of God act with righteous behavior, which certainly must include and even be directed and motivated by love. John expands on this statement about love as he

moves to the love test in today's text which begins with the word "for" (*hoti*). Just as right behavior is a mark, so is love an essential mark of the child of God (Marshall, 188f). Just as true Christians demonstrate the authenticity of their faith by godly behavior, so children of God must demonstrate their divine origin by obeying the command to love (Smalley, 179).

Follow as I read **1 John 3:11-18**.

It would be difficult to find a more carelessly and intentionally misused and abused word in the English language than the word "love." We use it to describe our fondness for Belgian chocolate as well as for our love for God, spouse, family, church and home country. Everyone in this room will claim to love something and perhaps also someone, but unfortunately we often use this word carelessly and for selfish reasons. I agree that "the meaning of love has become so debased in modern culture that practically anyone will claim to have love, according to his (or her) own definition" (Boice, 112).

Popular culture displays on all the entertainment media how the phrase "I love you" is used to exploit and deceive for sexual favors and other selfish reasons. A lustful man, wishing to "make love," says "I love you" to girl, while all the time meaning "I lust for you." The ways John and all of the New Testament speak about love is diametrically opposed to and absolutely foreign to many of the ways the world loves. The gospel of Christ gives an entirely different meaning to love.

John is addressing churches that were being influenced by false teachers who had defected from the true faith and claimed to have a special knowledge that made them spiritually elite and excused them from the responsibility to live morally pure lives and also to practice genuine love for others. In the first verse of our text (11) John no doubt addresses these Gnostics by saying the message to love one another is the message they "heard from the beginning." The gospel of Jesus Christ does not change and continues to hold authority over our lives, behavior and love of others (Stott, 139). No one is beyond the authority of this command, which stands at the very heart of the Christian gospel.

Also, the churches that John is addressing in his letters were already divided and being threatened by further schism. There were among the membership of these churches those who failed and even refused to love one another. John issued the love test to declare the impossibility of being a re-born child of God and not loving one's fellow believer, and doing so in active, practical ways. Even "Christian groups are not immune to the ugliness of enmity" between one another (Yarbrough, 197), whom we are commanded to love and to serve in peace and humility.

John says that love for one another is essential to the true child of God, and without the kind of love that John describes in our text we cannot possibly hope to pass the exam of the genuineness of our faith and assurance of eternal life. Let's note that love is essential, first of all because...

## **Loveless-ness is deadly**

John draws a sharp contrast between the love displayed by Christ and the deadly loveless-ness of Cain, the son of Adam and Eve and brother of Abel, whom he murdered (Genesis 4:1-16). We all must identify ourselves with either ancient Cain or with the eternal Christ. Whereas the love of Christ gives life, the loveless-ness of Cain brings death...

### *For the unloved*

When he saw that the Lord had looked with favor on Abel's offering and not with his, Cain became angry. He then ignored the Lord's warning about where his anger would lead, and attacked and killed his brother (Genesis 4:8). Cain had become jealous, and his jealousy turned to hatred, which gave rise naturally to murder. "All hatred is embryonic murder" (Marshall, 190), which Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-22). Anger and contempt for others produces a murderous heart in us, making us willing to kill if only we could get away with murder! Abel was the object of his brother's jealousy and hatred, and became the victim of Cain's murderous heart.

As followers of Christ and worshipers of the one true God, we can and should expect murderous hostility from the world. John says, "Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you" (13). Jesus says that "Everyone will hate you because of me" (Luke 21:17). "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first," Jesus says (John 15:18). He went on to explain that we, like him, do not belong to this world, and we can therefore expect those under the dark influence of the fallen world to misunderstand us and even to resent us. The presence of people of the light is a disturbing rebuke to those who live in the darkness. Jesus said, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). In fact, Jesus said that "the time is coming when anyone who kills you think they are offering a service to God" (John 16:2). That was certainly true of Saul of Tarsus, who, prior to his conversion to Christ, persecuted the church with murderous hatred (Acts 9:1f).

James Bryan Smith says that as God's children we are called to be a "peculiar people," quoting 1 Peter 2:9 in the King James Version. Since "peculiar" in modern English has the connotation of "odd" and "weird," and a better translation of the word would be "distinct" or "uniquely belonging to God," Smith emphasizes that we are called to be different from the world, and that many unbelievers think we're an odd sort (Smith, 27). One of the ways we are to be odd is by the radical love of Christ at work in us to motivate us to live and act in ways the world doesn't understand, considers strange and often resists and even opposes (32-35).

For the thousands and millions of believers today who are living in lands of persecution, this deadly loveless-ness is a vivid, everyday reality. Many of them are able, by the grace of God, to pray for their persecutors because they realize that

they, like Saul of Tarsus, are spiritually blinded by the god of this world and are expressing his hatred. All of God's people who are seeking to live a righteous life, said Paul the converted Saul, can expect to suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12).

Martin Niemoeller (1892-1984) was a Lutheran pastor who survived eight years in Nazi concentration camps, where he was imprisoned for his leadership in the Confessional Church, which opposed Hitler's attempt to control the churches ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin\\_Niemoeller](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Niemoeller)). In his courageous stand against the Third Reich in Germany, Niemoeller warned his congregation that they must expect the hatred of the world and therefore must prepare for persecution. But, he noted, there was reason for joy, knowing that there is certainty of victory through Christ. "It is indeed a conquered world which seeks to terrify us; it is indeed a condemned and dying hatred which attacks us" (235).

We can expect the jealousy, hatred and even hostile actions of unbelievers, including even people inside the church, whose hateful actions reveal they are not true believers (Marshall, 190). Cain was giving his offering at least ostensibly as an act of worship. How sad but true that some of the most murderous hatred can exist between people who are at least Christians by profession of faith. "Jealousy and competitive hostility resulted in Cain's murdering his brother, Abel" (Ogilvie, 100). How sad it is when we find this "murderous absence of love" in church life!

As one pastor noted, "Terrible battles again and again divide churches. These are usually portrayed," he said, "as doctrinal battles, as they sometimes are. But more often they are simply personality struggles fueled by jealousy. Choir members can be jealous of one another and hate one another even when they are singing in praise of God. Ministers can be jealous of other ministers, so much that they rejoice in the others' failures. Those in one denomination can have the same jealous hatred for those in another and seek to undermine their ministry. These things ought not to be," he said as a profound understatement (Boice, 119).

This loveless-ness can kill relationships and unity and even lead to the spiritual destruction of individuals as well as of churches, as I have witnessed. And this loveless-ness is deadly...

### *For the unloving*

Those who suffer the truly deadly effects of loveless-ness are the unloving themselves. Sadly, those who hate and fail to love others show themselves to be in the grips of the evil one, whom Jesus says "was a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44). Cain didn't become a child of the devil by murdering Abel, but because he was already a child of the devil he murdered his brother, and consequently suffered the curse for his sin (Barker, 335). As someone has said, we aren't sinners because we sin, but we sin because we are sinners.

John describes in our text the hatred of the world toward God's people. Our enemies, including those who would destroy us by their words or actions, are sinners in the grip of Satan himself. They are lost and apart from Christ, and unless they repent they must suffer the wages of sin, which is death—eternal separation from God (Romans 6:23).

What about those in the church, and the broader ecclesiastical world, who are ruled by jealousy, hatred and unjustified, self-centered anger toward another professing believer? Clearly from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, unjustified anger and contempt for others is as much a sin in God's eyes as is murder (Matthew 5:21f). Unless angry church members repent, they will too will perish (Luke 13:5). In fact, even preachers can fall under the devil's control through jealousy and resentment toward other preachers and pastors. If jealousy, bitterness, anger and resentment take over one's heart, there is a serious need for repentance, even on the part of so-called spiritual and church leaders. Unless there's a willingness and readiness to repent, then even pastors will fail the serious exam of the authenticity and verity of their salvation.

As HA Ironside said, "What a wretched thing this professional jealousy is! There is no room for it in love, in the new nature; and whenever you find it, it is simply an evidence of an unchanged old nature" (115f).

Loveless-ness in the church is deadly for all the combatants. I wonder how many, because of jealousy, anger and resentment, and because of conflicts between Christians and schisms in the church, have made shipwreck of their faith or caused the shipwreck of others (1 Timothy 1:19)?

British Admiral Lord Nelson (1758 –1805), "when his ships were drawn up in battle-array facing the Dutch fleet...saw two English officers quarreling. He threw himself in between and pushed them apart, as he said, pointing to the ships of Holland, 'Gentlemen, there are your enemies!'" (Ironside, 116).

An odd phrase in military combat is "friendly fire," used to describe the inadvertent firing of weapons against one's own military. It doesn't sound "friendly to me when soldiers are injured by their comrades. Too many people in the churches are injured, and some mortally, spiritually and perhaps even eternally, by "friendly fire." John says not only is it not friendly—it's actually deadly and straight from the devil.

Christ Jesus suffered on the cross the full effects of all the loveless-ness and all the sin of the world. The law and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount condemns us all as sinners, who have failed in keeping all the law, thus being guilty as sinners before a holy God (Romans 3:23). We have sinned in failing to keep the Great Commandment to love God with all our being and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:28-34). The only way we can escape punishment for our sin of loveless-ness is to repent of our sin and trust Christ as our Savior. We are then justified by grace through our faith and are given new life in Christ (Romans 5:1f; 2 Corinthians

5:17). Our deadly loveless-ness can be forgiven only through the grace of God in Christ Jesus. We must go to him in repentance, confessing our sin of loveless-ness. Christ alone can heal us and then give us a new heart to release anger, bitterness and hatred and learn to love even our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48).

John has shown the destructive, deadly effects of loveless-ness, using the negative example of Cain, and in contrast he will give the positive example of Jesus in showing that...

## **Love is divine**

In both his gospel and in his letters, John features the unique love of God, using the word *agape*, which is the God-like love that initiated the incarnation and the cross of Christ and that God both enables and requires of his children (Westcott, 130-134). John writes in verse 16 that...

### *Christ displays love*

The love that Christ displays to the world is one of an undeserved but desperately needed sacrificial deliverance. We were lost in our sins, without hope and without God in the world until Christ rescued us through his suffering love (Ephesians 2:12). Christ demonstrated clearly and once for all that God's love is unconditional (offered to all and all are undeserving), universal, sacrificial and practical (Romans 5:8; John 3:16; Galatians 2:20).

Some people think of Jesus as a teacher of love, and accept what he says in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:43ff) but see no need for his death on the cross. But it was "the Cross on the Hill" and not "the Sermon on the Mount" that produced the impact of God's love upon the world (Yarbrough, 203). Christ's love was not an example alone, but was a practical, desperately needed action in behalf of us sinners.

An illustration of this is that of someone sitting on the end of a pier on a sunny day, enjoying the sunshine and air, and a stranger came along and jumped into the water and drowned "to prove his love" for the person on the pier. This would be a senseless, wasted sacrifice, even though the person on the pier in fact was "much in need of love." But should this person on the pier fall into the water and begin to drown, and then someone sprang into the water and risked and even gave his life to rescue the drowning victim, then the act of sacrifice would make sense. In the same way, God's love for us is a purposeful, redeeming sacrifice (Marshall, 193, quoting J Denny, whose story I paraphrased).

This practical, sacrificial love of God that saves us is the same kind of love God gives us and requires of us. And...

### *Conversion enables love*

John notes that genuine believers have “crossed over” from death to life (14), which is a “graphic description” of the conversion experience (Smalley, 188f). Conversion is a supernatural experience that brings about a change in the way we think and act. We aren’t converted by our love, but conversion produces love in us (Yarbrough, 200).

Love is the sign of genuine conversion, the first of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22f) and without which the Christian life amounts to just empty chatter (1 Corinthians 13:1ff). This Christ-like love is the “tangible evidence of rebirth” (Comfort, 2144).

It’s interesting to me that when asked about “the plan of salvation,” i.e. how to gain eternal life, Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). True conversion results in Christ-like love as illustrated by a Samaritan who acted with practical care toward an undeserving enemy. Jesus is so confident of that true conversion and discipleship results in godly love that he not only gives this parable but also tells the Sheep and Goats story of the final judgment, which will be based on acts of love that indicate saving grace and genuine conversion (Matthew 26:31-46. See also Matthew 7:21-23). We are saved by grace but will be judged by our acts of love. God gives us this grace and capacity to love even our enemies.

But not only does he give it, but also...

### *God demands love*

Just as grace enables us to love others, active love is demanded. Love is essential to the believer and for Kingdom-of-God living. The priest and the Levite, the professional clergymen of Jesus’ day, showed their true colors as “nominal” but not true believers (Luke 10:31f). Their indifference showed the absence of the love of God in them.

John asks how a believer, who has ample material provisions and sees another believer in need, can be indifferent and claim to have the love of God (17). The “love of God” that is within believers can refer to either to our love for God or his love for us (Morris, 1266). I think it’s both! We love because God first loved us (4:19). To love God and others is an essential part of our new nature and is now our new and Great Commandment (John 13:34). We can never love God to the degree he loves us, but we can and must live with the same kind of God-like love.

The love of God is not sentimental, but is sacrificial and practical. We may be called on to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters (16), and we can pray for grace to do that should the need arise. We know that martyrdom for Christ and for fellow believers is a growing reality in our world today with the persecuted church. We who enjoy freedom from persecution may not be asked to give ourselves unto death, but we’re all called upon to offer our lives as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1).

“The need of the world is not for heroic acts of martyrdom, but for heroic acts of material sacrifice. If I am a well-off Christian, while others are poor, I am not acting as a true Christian” (Marshall, 195f).

That quote by a well-respected evangelical scholar may sound a bit socialistic to you, but it's quite in line with our text (17). We who live in relative affluence in prosperous countries find ourselves insulated from the truly needy and can too easily dismiss our responsibility to the needy with a less-than sacrificial benevolence donation.

It seems to me that, when Jesus promises to meet his followers' needs he has in mind to care for them through the sacrifice and generosity of his more prosperous people, as we see in Acts 2:45; 4:35; Romans 12:13 and 2 Corinthians 8:13ff. God works through the obedient, sacrificial love of his people to care for the needs of one another and even as the means of fulfilling his promises to care for his people (Matthew 6:25-34; Luke 12:22-31).

Words without actions are empty and reveal an artificial faith, as John says (18), as well as James (1:22; 2:14-17). Just hearing sermons and watching videos and hearing reports about the poor and suffering can serve to dull our sensitivity and compassion and serve as a substitute for caring involvement in meeting the needs of real people whom God would place in our pathway. It's easy to “love” in the abstract, and yet not in the concrete, i.e. in specific ways and in the practical reality of daily life. Concrete as a noun means “a hard strong building material,” such as used to build houses and streets. As an adjective it can mean “specific, real, particular and tangible,” which is the way we are to express love.

I heard about an elderly, retired gentleman who enjoyed sitting in front of his house, watching the neighborhood children play on his front sidewalk. He so enjoyed them, he would frequently give them candy treats to allure them to play where he could enjoy watching them. One day he had a new walkway installed in front of his house, and the cement, or concrete, was still wet and hadn't hardened and cured. The neighborhood children, out of force of habit, came running across the fresh concrete in front of the usually gentle and kind old man's house. Seeing them in his fresh concrete he came running furiously and shouting for them to get off of his wet walkway. When his wife calmed him down, she reprimanded him for his anger and said his conduct toward the children was totally different and asked him why. “I loved them in the abstract,” he replied, “but not in the concrete.”

### **Conclusion:**

Concrete love is essential to the follower of Christ. Loveless-ness condemns us to uncertainty of our relationship with Christ, who has given us grace to love and the

commandment to love. Although we are called to love even our enemies, the real test in our text is our willingness to love our brothers and sisters in Christ.

This of course calls first of all for reconciliation with one another if there relationships broken or strained by jealousy, anger or indifference, all of which are deadly loveless-ness. Jesus gives the steps for reconciliation (Matthew 5:21-26; 18:15-20), and we're to not let the sun go down on our anger (Ephesians 4:26). We're to resolve our differences and not allow anger and resentment to grow into bitterness and hatred.

Not only are we to refrain from the negative, but are to learn to grow in positive love for one another. It's great to see how you enjoy fellowship with one another as we gather after services for the fellowship time. But true love requires more of an investment of time and attention than we can give in that short space of time.

Many of our fellow believers are starving for true Christian love, and we all benefit from the sharing, caring, prayer and genuine fellowship that takes place in small groups, such as in our prayer and Bible studies and home groups. This kind of fellowship and caring brings "new warmth to congregations as a whole," says one pastor (Ogilvie, 103). Love is nurtured in relationships and relationships hold love accountable and give it meaningful application. One of our home groups has been active in reaching out financially and practically to families of home group members from countries in Eastern Europe and Eastern Africa. Other meaningful ministries are taking place in small groups, and a lot of these ministry needs would otherwise be unnoticed by the larger congregation.

Love is essential for our personal spiritual growth but also as the primary motivation and focus of our service in the Body of Christ. Just as love for one another was the solution and mandate that John issued for churches threatened by schism, so we at IBC Brussels must keep the Great Commandment as central to our vision and mission statement. We are to reach out to the fallen (Galatians 6:1) and also to the unloved among us, whether brother, sister, friend or foe. Essential love: this is how the community around us will know we're truly Jesus' followers, if we love one another (John 13:35).

### **Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

1. Why shouldn't followers of Christ be surprised by the hatred and contempt of unbelievers?

2. Why do you think Jesus said that unjustified anger and contempt for others is as guilty before God as actual murder (Matthew 5:21-22)?
3. Give some examples of how church members can “murder” and destroy fellow members with their loveless jealousy, anger, and competitive spirit.
4. In what way is Christ our perfect example for loving others?
5. How does Christ enable us to love difficult people?
6. Do you agree with this comment on verse 17, “If I am a well-off Christian, while others are poor, I am not acting as a true Christian” (I Howard Marshall)? Why do you agree or disagree?
7. Spend some time thinking about those you find difficult to love and those you know who are in need of an extra expression of love. Then ask God to help you to show the love of Christ to them this week.

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