

Love's True Measure 1 John 3:16-24

Introduction

John's instruction regarding love and hate naturally leads to the question of how to define what love and hatred are. How do we know when we are living in accord with love and when we are behaving with hatred?

Remember the inseparable connection between sin and hatred and between righteousness and love. *Sin declares independence from God's authority and puts self in charge. It is inherently self-centered and harmful to others.*

Righteousness acknowledges God's rightful authority over us. He commands us to do good toward others (love). So righteousness puts helping others above serving ourselves. It is self-forgetting, self-denying, self-sacrificing. That's why Jesus declared that to be His disciple you have to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him.

It is to the cross of Jesus, therefore, that John points our attention as the true measure of love.

16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives

for the brothers. ¹⁷ 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? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

¹⁹ By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; ²⁰ for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; ²² and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. ²³ 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. ²⁴ Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

1. Demonstration of Love (16-18)
2. Assurance of Heart (19-22)
3. Commandment of God (23-24)

1. Demonstration of Love (16-18)

¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

Christ's laying down his life shows us the nature of true love. Jesus Himself uses the same language John uses here.

John 10:11

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

When we truly love a person we find that giving up ourselves for them is what we want to do—even delight to do. Love makes us willing and eager to lay down our lives for people we love. We are naturally reluctant to sacrificing for those with whom we have no personal connection. But for those we love, it's a different story. We find joy in giving generously of ourselves to them.

John 15:13

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

We lay down our lives for our brother and sisters in Christ with the same spirit He laid down His life for us. It is voluntary. It is love-driven. We want what is good for our fellow family members in the household of God.

Philippians 2:3-8

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among

yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Christ went all the way to the cross for us. He humbled Himself even to death. The chance to die physically for another person is not common. When and if the opportunity comes, you can do it only once. So John goes to what that kind of self-sacrificing love looks like in normal, everyday life.

¹⁷ 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?

If anyone—this is universal in its application

First, has this world's goods—remember from Whom everything you have comes.

Second, sees his brother in need—awareness, attention given, more than just an impression

Third, yet closes his heart against him—an internal process before it ever manifests itself in outward action or inaction. The language

John uses points to a visceral emotional response—you feel the compassion physically. When we grieve deeply or fear greatly or have any kind of intense emotion, our bodies react internally, not just our minds. Idioms: a broken heart—great pain in our chest. Butterflies in the stomach.

John's words recall what God commanded His people in Deuteronomy 15:7-10:

⁷ If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, ⁸ but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. . . . ¹⁰ You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.

Woven into this command is way of living that is profoundly God-conscious and God-dependent.

¹⁸ Little children [born of the heavenly Father], let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

Without deeds to back it up just talking about love is worthless, even insulting and dishonest—the classic bait and switch.

Genuine love—love in truth—shows itself with deeds, not just words. We know this instinctively, yet we also know it is easier just to talk about love than to practice it. Love costs us something. Talk is often free.

Romans 5:8 God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

What is in your hand that could help a brother or sister you know is in need? Not always things—could be time. Either way, you are giving a piece of yourself to them. Lay your life down for others. Stop clutching it to yourself so tightly. As any wedding teaches us, there is joy in giving yourself away to someone you love.

2. Assurance of Heart (19-22)

¹⁹ By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him;
²⁰ for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.

By this—by our ongoing practical loving deeds—we shall know we are of the truth. The fruitfulness of loving actions displays the reality of spiritual life from God.

That evidence of divine life in us gives us assurance that we are truly saved. It is not the basis of our salvation—we *are not saved by our good works. They are the fruit of our salvation not the root—the outward manifestation of an inward change.* It's how people know what kind of tree we are.

“Whenever our heart condemns us”—that’s the effect on us whenever we behave in an unloving way. Sinful behavior erodes our sense of assurance that we are truly saved. But God is greater than our heart. He knows our true identity. He knows whether we have life. Sometimes we don’t live consistently with the life of God in us. We feel the guilt of what is out of step with our identity. It troubles us. The Holy Spirit convicts us of that sin, leading us to confess it and to repent of it, asking forgiveness on the merits of Jesus. The pain and grief we feel from our own sin—our unloving behavior—drives us to Jesus to be cleansed and restored to fellowship. With fellowship restored, love begins to flow again.

1 John 3:21

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God.

When we sin against God our hearts condemn us, driving us to the cross of Jesus to be cleansed from our sin. When we do right

before God our hearts rejoice. Our confidence that we truly belong to God grows stronger.

The damage sin does to you and me is not just punishment for when we get caught. It is the immediate impact of feeling distanced from God. Sin torments our hearts.

It is a beautiful and joyful thing to walk in God's ways. It is what you and I were created to do. It may cost us our very lives in a world hostile to God. But those who follow Jesus find a reason for joy even suffering for righteousness sake. It's worth it to them to be close to God. They grieve when they aren't.

1 John 3:22

And whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

Our desire is not just to obey God but to please Him—to bring Him pleasure. It's not slavish obedience. It is a submission of love, of relationship. That love relationship gives us confidence in prayer.

In the context of using this world's goods to help a brother in need, we could wonder whether we will have enough. We save for a reason. Proverbs teaches that wisdom leads us to do so. We know that days will come

when we will need to use what we saved. Joseph in Egypt instituted a policy of saving up the surplus of the seven years of plenty so that there would be enough for the seven years of famine.

What John is underscoring is that God supplies what we have. When we use what we have to help brothers in genuine need, we are doing His work, His will. We can ask Him for whatever we need. He will keep taking care of us. This is no new idea.

Psalm 41:1

Blessed is the one who considers the poor! In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him.

Proverbs 19:17

Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed.

Paul applies this principle in his appeal to the church at Corinth to make good on their commitment to help their Jewish brothers suffering famine in Jerusalem:

1 Corinthians 9:6-8

⁶ The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is

able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

Paul has built his argument on the sacrificial work of Christ for us:

2 Corinthians 8:9

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

So those who have been truly born again through Christ undergo a fundamental change of heart in how they view material possessions. *As sinners we are takers. As saints we are givers.*

Ephesians 4:28

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

Struggling with assurance?

2 Peter 1: God has given us all we need for life and godliness, so make it an urgent priority to grow spiritually in faith, virtue knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, love. Fruitfulness will confirm your calling and election—assurance.

3. Commandment of God (23-24)

²³ 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. ²⁴ Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

Three times in two verses John refers to divine commands. There are two major ones. **Believe**—believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ. This is the foundational command.

Reliance on the revealed character and work of Jesus (Yahweh saves) as the promised Messiah and God the Son.

Reliance on Jesus Christ God's Son fundamentally transforms our identity, our behavior, and our destiny. All because we have been brought back into fellowship with God—reconciliation, and have received His life in us—regeneration.

Love—love one another (as he has commanded us)

This obedience is the fruit of God's life abiding in us.

1 John 3:24

Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know

that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

Obedience to these commands is proof that we abide in God and He abides in us by the Holy Spirit He has given to indwell every true born-again believer. This close connection with God—we in Him and He in us—is what transforms believers from what they were to what they are and shall be.

John's last words in verse 24 bridge into his next topic of testing the spirits, whether they are of God. The Spirit of God is holy and good. But some spirit beings are evil—Satan and his demons. Just because something is spiritual does not make it good. We need discernment to know the difference.

Believe. Are you relying on the revealed person and work of Jesus Christ God's Son? Do you believe God's promise of salvation through Him alone? Or are you still relying on yourself or some other false version of reality?

Love. Has your reliance on Jesus transformed your heart and life to love your others and sisters in Christ? Or are you still self-centered?

Conclusion

Part of what makes the good news good is the transformation God works in those who trust in Jesus. Stop trying to find life in anyone or anything else but Him. Only He can heal our brokenness and give you life—a life that reveals itself in love.

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Discussion Questions

1. What is an example of when your love for someone made you truly happy to sacrifice something for that person?
2. What makes duty a delight, and how does that principle translate into helping a brother or sister in need?
3. Why is selfishness the way of unhappiness?
4. What are some common needs of people around you, and how could you demonstrate God's love in you by opening your heart and hands to satisfy that need?
5. What is the connection John draws between a lifestyle of showing love to others and enjoying the assurance that you belong to God?
6. What could be some reasons a person truly belongs to God and yet struggles with assurance that he or she does?

7. Given what John says here and what Peter teaches in 2 Peter 1:3-11, what is the best strategy to strengthen your assurance that you are truly saved?
8. What is the inseparable connection between putting faith in God's Son Jesus Christ and loving one another?
9. Who is it that produces love for others in the heart of a believer?