

As I Have Loved You

1 John 3:11-18; 4:7-11

Turn to 1 John 3 please. This is the 20th year our church has practiced church membership by making a covenant with each other. The main idea of the covenant is that we tell each other before God that we will love the people in this church the way God told us to love one another.

We speak to each other, then those of us who intend to be members go sign our names on a sheet of paper at the back. That is our membership list. It lasts for one year. A year later, we do it all again. In that sense, membership only lasts one year. We do this the first Sunday of November.

There are a few copies of our whole covenant at the back. Feel free to take one if you wish. We adjust the wording a bit once in a while, but there have not been any changes in the last year.

The only reason we have church membership is so that we can say these words to each other every year. Membership does not get you much else here. We get to say that we will love each other and forgive and help each other and serve each other, and then we get to do that for a year. That's what membership gets you. And in a year, we'll do it all again, so we don't forget.

Our goal here is not to have a happy, loving church, though we want that. Our goal is to follow the Lord Jesus, and to bring glory and honour to God our Father. We have membership like this because God in his Scripture makes clear that this is the most important thing he wants from his people. If we are going to follow the Lord, and honour God, it means loving one another.

A few weeks ago we asked, what is the mission of the church? We looked at six priorities that Christians talk about, and then we asked, which of these six do the NT letters urge us to do? And the answer, if we look at all the NT letters, from Romans to Revelation, is one overwhelming priority – how we treat each other in the family of believers that we meet with and worship with.

Our sermon today, on 1 John, will show the same kind of thing. These paragraphs do not just say, “here's another thing to do, love one another.” No, these paragraphs are clear, “there's one crucial thing to do, if we know God: love one another.”

First paragraph, 1 John 3:11-18. *For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. 12 Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. 13 Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. 15 Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him. 16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them,*

how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

3:11 - *For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.* This is John writing. He's probably thinking about Jesus who said, *A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another* (Jn 13:34). That's the message we heard from the beginning.

3:12a - *Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother.* This is the opposite of love: to attack a brother or sister. This is what people do who belong to the evil one. John blunt language here, and we'll let it stand as he says it. Don't be like Cain.

3:14 - *We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death.* How do we know that we have eternal life? Because we love each other. Anyone who's not a part of this remains in death.

3:15 *Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.* Hate is basically one with murder. Hate and murder and hostile attack are all of the same species, in a sense. The kind of thing Cain did to his brother. That's the opposite of love.

He's talking to real Christians here, people like us, not those other people. John knows this is not automatic, not easy, Christians struggle with this, John knows all that.

3:16a *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.* This is the first definition of love in this paragraph. We've seen the opposite of love, Cain murdered his brother. *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.* Otherwise, we'd not know. Lots of confusion in the world about love. *Jesus Christ laid down his life for us: that is how we know what love is.*

3:16b - *And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.* Jesus in John 13: *A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*

Christian love is doing for each other what Christ did for us. That is the starting point of Christian love. *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.*

Love is costly and difficult. Not much warm sentimental stuff here, is there. Cain took the life of his brother. Jesus gave up his own life for us. Real death, ugly physical death, in both cases. Cain did it to another, Jesus submitted to it for the sake of another. That's love.

That's love, and that's hate. What do we think it will feel like to love each other here in this room? We will have reasons to hate. The reason we don't hate is not that we don't have reasons to hate. We don't hate because we are not of the evil one, so we aim ourselves toward love.

3:17 - *If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, no compassion on them, how can the love of God be in that person?* Wow. John very quickly moved from laying down our lives, to sharing our money and possessions.

What's love? It means no attack, it means laying down our loves for each other, and laying down our money and possessions for each other. I don't like this money part any better than you do, my brothers and sisters. I'd rather God asked something else. But that's the first application.

And if we have money and possessions to help a brother or sister in need, but don't, then others should ask if the love of God is in us at all. God says, "You say you love? Great. May I have your wallet?"

3:18 - *Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.* God is not much impressed with saying "I love you," even if we think we mean it. Actions say what matters, words don't say what matters. *Dear children, don't be fooled about this, let us not love with words or speech, but with actions and in truth.*

What God actually does is both words and action. God tells us, "I will do this for you because I love you," and then he does it, and then he explains himself again afterward. "I did that for you because I love you." God never says he loves us without telling us at the same time what he did to show it. God obviously feels love. But he talks more about his actions than feelings. Words without actions are not true, no matter how true they feel or sound.

We could treat God like this. We could also treat each other like this. "I did this because I love you." Action and explanation. Next week we'll have our covenant of membership. That's words. The only thing that matters is how God uses those words to actually steer our lives in the coming year. We know from the past that God does use those words to steer our lives. That's the goal.

Now to 1 John 4:7-12 - *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives among us and his love is made complete in us.*

We will take 4:9-10 as our starting point here, which describe God's love for us. John says basically the same thing two times: *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.* And in different words, *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

God showed that love among us. This is love: God sent his one and only Son into the world to die, that we might live. God sent his one and only Son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins. This is how God loves us. This action tells us what love is.

In 1 John 3, we know what love is because Christ died for us. It says: *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.* Love is Christ dying for us.

In 1 John 4, love is a parent sending their one and only child into the world to die. *This is love: God sent his one and only Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

There is a distress that happens when parents watch their children suffer. It is not quite like anything else. It surprised me, when I became a parent. The parent would far rather suffer in place of their child, but that's not possible. God knows all about that particular distress.

Noble parents can neglect their children for some honourable goal. I read *Long Walk to Freedom*, which is the story of Nelson Mandela in S. Africa. He was an admirable man who worked his whole life to get freedom for blacks in S. Africa. In the process he almost completely neglected his wife and children. Christians have mistakenly done this for God often enough.

God was NOT like that toward his Son Jesus. He did give his Son for us, but never as an act of neglect, never putting his Son aside because there was something more important to do. Never.

God send his Son on a mission, a difficult task, that would make us in this room his children forever. Both parent and child knew the whole mission was difficult, and it would end horribly, a humiliating and painful death. A parent can sort of imagine what that would cost the Father.

Let's get a few things clear: (1) From the start, Father and Son were in complete agreement about what would happen, and why. It was to bring us to God. Both agreed from the start.

(2) The child could have backed out at any time. Jesus in John 12: *And now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? Father save me from this hour? No, this is why I came! Father, glorify your name.* If Jesus had asked, the plan was off. But he did not ask. He laid down his life.

Later Jesus prays, *Father, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done.* If Jesus had not ended the prayer that way, "not by will but yours," God would have taken the cup away.

Even after Gethsemane, when the crowd came to arrest Jesus, he told his disciples, “Put your swords away. Don’t know you that I could call on more than twelve armies of angels to get me out of this mess? But then I would not be doing what the Scripture tells me to do.”

Right to the end, Jesus could have backed out. And although this is never said, right to the end the Father could have backed out, could have sent the twelve armies of angels to rescue the Son even without the Son asking. But the child did not ask, and the parent did not save the child.

Why did the Son stick with the plan? Because he loved us, he was resolved to lay down his life for the sheep. And the Father stuck with the plan because he wanted us, he loved us.

Word studies about the Greek word for love, *agapē*, drive me nuts. We know what love us because we know the story of the Son laying down his life for us, we know what love is because we know the story of the Father sending his Son. The Greeks who used the word *agapē*, did not know anything about love like this.

What Jesus did for us, what the Father did for us, that’s what love is, that’s Christian love. And in both cases, old John of Zebedee writes, “and now, dear children, let’s love each other this way.” And that is why we have a covenant of membership.

If we are ever groping for reasons to thank God, we could start here. “Wow God, Thanks. We never saw love like that anywhere. Thank you Lord Jesus, for laying down your life. Thank you Father, for sending your one and only Son to give us life for us.”

And we often hear the other voice, “Has God said that he loves you? Think about your troubles that do not go away. Has God said he loves you? You should doubt God’s love.” And John of Zebedee says, “Don’t listen to that dark voice.”

We cannot measure God’s love by if he takes away our pain and our troubles. Jesus was clear, in this world we will have troubles. God gives us no reason to measure his love by this.

The Bible all over the place records the troubles of God’s people. In the world you will have troubles, but because I love you I will take away your troubles? No. In the world you will have troubles, but be encouraged, because I love you I have overcome the world.

But at the same time let’s remember this: God has saved us from all the Big Troubles. The Big Troubles are for those who walk away from this love. Big Troubles are coming to those people, and we are rescued from all the Big Troubles, what Paul calls “the coming wrath.”

God has shown us that he loves us. God has shown us what “love” means. And God has shown us what he wants from us: love one another like this. Our covenant of membership seems feeble after these stories. But we have to do something, so our covenant is a start.

Now I will just read 4:7-8 and 11. *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. V11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* When we love each other, we show that we are born of God, and we know God.

Verse 12 deserves a moment, then we are done: *No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives among us and his love is made complete in us.*

This verse answer the question: what is the closest we get to actually seeing God? [repeat] *No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives among us and his love is made complete in us.*

The closest we get to seeing God is when we love one another. When we do this, God is visibly present in our midst, he visibly lives among us, in our acts of love. Our God detector is not very good. On what basis do we decide God is here among us, or not? We tend to go by some gift of the Spirit, or a miracle, at least a feeling of God among us. John is not impressed with those.

Our God detector is not reliable, has never been. This Scripture educates our God detector. It is very similar to Paul's message in 1 Corinthians, especially 1 Cor 13. They also had unreliable God detectors. The real measure of God's powerful presence is our love for each other, for Paul as for John.

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives among us and his love is made complete in us. God's love for us is not complete with the death of the Son and our atonement, it has not been fruitful among us as God wants his love to be fruitful until we love one another as Christ loved us, as the Father loved us.

Our love for each other is the missing piece, our love makes his great love complete.

Amen.

Prayer: Father, we've heard all this before, which is good, but we are surprised all over again at your great love for us. Thank you Lord Jesus, for laying down your life. Thank you Father, for sending your Son. Thank you for showing us what love actually is. Thank you for showing us how to know that we are your children, how to see your presence in our midst. And now, Father, make your love complete in us. Equip us with everything good for doing your will, and work in us what pleases you. Complete in us the work you have begun. Lead us, Father, again and again, to show your kind of love for each other. Amen.