

“By This We Know Love” (An Exposition of 1 John 3:11-18)¹

Introduction

On the first Sundays of the month we have been taking a break from our study through 1 John to go through the ten commandments, one commandment at a time. For some of these studies we have spent more than one Sunday on a particular commandment, as I thought it would be helpful for us to look at the text of the particular commandment itself (such as **“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”** - Exodus 20:8-11), and then to examine another key passage that sheds additional light on that commandment in some way.

As I was thinking about the sixth commandment, and trying to decide which other relevant passage would be the most helpful for us to look at, it occurred to me that the very passage that we are up to in our study through 1 John actually fits that bill very well. For in 1 John chapter 3, where John teaches us about the importance of the love of the brethren, he does so by speaking of *the sin of murder* in contrast to it. And in so doing he shows us how the command to **“love one another”** (v.11) in many ways involves the fulfillment (both negatively and positively) of the sixth commandment, as it relates to other believers.

Our text also demonstrates for us the biblical basis for the way that the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* explains both the *positive* and *negative* aspects of true obedience to this commandment. Just as we saw in our study of the sixth commandment itself from Exodus 20:13 a number of weeks ago, the catechism teaches us both what is *required* of us in this commandment (i.e. “all lawful endeavors to *preserve* our own life, and the life of others” - Q/A 68) as well as what is expressly *forbidden* in it (i.e. “the *taking away* of our own life, or the life of our neighbor unjustly, or whatsoever tendeth thereunto” - Q/A 69).

Our text today treats the subject of the sin of murder that very same way, showing us that the Westminster divines were not superimposing their own ideas upon the text of Scripture, but instead were merely being faithful interpreters of it.

For what does John teach us in our text, but both what is *forbidden* by the sixth commandment - that **“[w]e should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother”** (v.12), even to the extent that he tells us that **“[e]veryone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”** (v.15); as well as what is *required* of us in it, that **“we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers”** (v.16) and that we should not *close our hearts against our brothers* who are in need when it is within our ability to help them (v.17).

And in our text John also teaches us something that is expressly taught elsewhere in Scripture as well, namely that all of this is really *a matter of love for the brethren*. As Paul tells us in Romans 13:8–10,

“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

Many today – even in the church – pit love against obedience to God's commandments, as if love made obedience to God's law unnecessary. But that is clearly *not* what the Scriptures teach us at all, is it? Love obeys God's law. Love is the motive for obedience to God's law. Love itself, both for God and for our neighbor, is *commanded* of us by God.

This morning we want to briefly look at *one of the many applications of the sixth commandment*, specifically in how it applies between Christians in that we are love one another. That is certainly the way that John applies it throughout our text, isn't it?

The Example of Cain

In v.11 John starts off by telling us, **“For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.”** As Christians we are to *love our neighbor as ourselves* (Matthew 22:39; Leviticus 19:18), and *especially* our brothers and sisters in the Lord! So far so good, right? But then John adds what may seem like a *non-sequitur*. In v.12 he says:

“We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous.”

It might seem like quite the leap to go from the commandment to love one another to suddenly speaking of *not being like Cain* who *murdered* his brother. Why does John do this? Certainly he was *not* worried about Christians actually *killing* each other. So what is his point?

First, he is echoing the teaching of our Lord Jesus in reminding us that in many ways *hatred is tantamount to murder*. Hatred is not just the fount from which the vile sin of murder flows, but is itself in some ways *equivalent* to it. In Matthew 5:21–22 the Lord Jesus tells us:

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”

Simply put, hatred or unjust anger against a brother is a sin that is worthy of hell. It is spiritual murder, or *murder in the heart*, even if not of the person bodily.

Now we would probably be justified in pointing out that the early Gnostics whose teaching and influence John was refuting here were in fact guilty of being like Cain in *hating the brethren*, both in *separating from them* (i.e. **“they went out from us, but they were not of us”** - 2:19) and in teaching heresy and a false gospel.

But it is likely that it went *beyond* that as well. For in teaching their Gnostic *spirit-matter dualism*, which holds that the physical or material is evil, and that only what is spiritual or immaterial is good, they may have gone so far as to provide themselves and their followers with a *rationale for neglecting the material needs of their poorer brethren*.

After all, if the physical is evil, then neglect or even harsh treatment of the body is to be expected, even in some ways often encouraged. As always, *false doctrine breeds false living*.

But beyond that, John's aim here in bringing up the wickedness of Cain in slaughtering his brother was almost certainly intended to have some *shock value* to it. The sin of Cain in murdering his own brother is truly horrific to contemplate. Just imagine, not just the first murder, but that this murder involved *fratricide* – Abel's own flesh & blood, who should have been his “**keeper**” or protector (Genesis 4:9), was instead his killer, and that violently so!

That is a picture of what hatred and a lack of love of the brethren is like. John's point here is to impress upon us *the seriousness of the sin of hatred and neglect of the brethren*. It is as the sin of Cain in killing his own brother.

When we fail to truly love one another “**in deed and in truth**” (v.18), we are *being like Cain*. And if that is the pattern of our lives, it shows that we are not yet born of God. As John tells us in v.15, **“Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”**

And so when we think of *the sixth commandment*, and what obedience to it involves, one of the things that we should think of is *the love of the brethren*, and how the hatred or neglect of them is what is forbidden in it. As the Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 4:30–32,

“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

Do we harbor “**bitterness and wrath and anger**” toward each other? *Malice*? Do we *slander* each other? If we are honest, these things are *not uncommon* among believers.

We should search our hearts to see if there be any of these things in us, and pray for forgiveness and the grace to repent of such sins, lest we '**grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom we were sealed for the day of redemption.**' (v.30) A lack of love for the brethren *grieves* the Holy Spirit.

The Example of Christ

John thankfully turns our attention from the wicked example of “**Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother**” in v.12 to the blessed example of our Lord Jesus in v.16, where he writes:

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

How do we know what love is? What is the source and standard of true brotherly love? John tells us that it is by Christ laying down His life for us that we “**know love.**” And certainly he is *not* just saying that we “**know**” this love in a mere intellectual sense. He is speaking of, *not* just an intellectual understanding of love, but an *experiential* knowledge as well.

We who have believed in Christ have come to know the love of God in Jesus Christ. That is easy to *talk about*, but do we ever really meditate on the greatness of what that means in our lives, and just how greatly we have been blessed by the grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ?

The Lord Jesus was not just the hapless victim in His death on the cross, but rather John reminds us that He **“laid down his life.”** (v.16) In John 10:18 Jesus says:

“No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

When one of His disciples tried to defend Him *with the sword* during His betrayal and arrest, Jesus said, **“Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?”** (Matthew 26:53–54) Jesus willingly laid down His life as an atonement for sin.

And not just that, but John tells us that in doing so He **“laid down his life *for us.*”** He did *not* just die as a sacrifice in some vague general sense, but *as an atonement for the sins of His people*. He did not just lay down His life, but did so **“for us”** and *for our salvation*.

Our Lord Jesus explicitly commands us as believers to *follow His example* of self-sacrificing love for each other. In John 15:12–14 He says:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

Our acts of love are *not* redemptive (only Christ's was), but they are a reflection of Christ's love. And *because* our Lord laid down His life for us, **“we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.”** (v.16)

The word that is translated as **“ought”** there conveys the idea of *owing a debt* or being *under obligation*. It is the same word that Paul used in Romans 1:14 when he said that he was a **“debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise”** (KJV) - that he in some way *owed* it to them to preach the gospel to them!

We *owe it to each other* to love one another, *not* because *any of us* have done enough for each other to put us under such an obligation, but because *Christ Himself* has done so!

If we understand *the awful depth of our sin and guilt* before God and *the infinite price that was paid by Christ* on the cross to redeem us from our sin and from our old way of life, how can we not then love one another from the heart? How can we *not* **“lay down our lives for the brothers”**?

No wonder John tells us in v.17–18:

“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? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”

If we are not willing to love our brethren in *tangible*, even *sacrificial* ways, **“in deed and in truth,”** how can we imagine that the love of God dwells in us? May the Lord search our hearts and reveal to us the ways in which we may need repentance and renewal in these things.

Love of the Brethren and the Lord's Supper

As we are celebrating the Lord's Supper today, it is especially fitting that we be reminded of these things. For what are we reminded of at the Lord's table except that He loved us and **“laid down his life for us”**? What is *signified and sealed unto us* in this sacrament except Christ's redemption on the cross for our sins, that we might have eternal life by faith in Him?

And what were the Corinthians admonished and rebuked for in their observance of the Lord's Supper if not for a neglect and abuse of the poorer of the brethren among them – a lack of love of the brethren?

In 1 Corinthians 11:20–22 Paul writes:

“When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.”

Then in v.27–29 he says,

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks *without discerning the body* eats and drinks judgment on himself.”

Discerning the body may actually be a reference to being mindful of the body of Christ, meaning the church. (There may be a kind of *double-meaning* implied there.)

So when we come to the table this morning, let us do so *in remembrance of Christ*, thinking much on the fact that *He laid down His life for us* and for our salvation from sin. For as John tells us, it is **“*By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us*”** (v.16)

May the Lord Jesus work in us by His Spirit that we might come to more and more **“know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge”** (Ephesians 3:19), so that we might in turn grow more and more in our love for each other, even laying down our lives for the brethren. - Amen