

## **Love is... laying down one's life ( 1 John 3:16-24)**

*We talk a lot about love and its importance, but do we ever ask ourselves what we mean by 'love'? In 1 John we are called to love one another as Christians, but we are also shown what love is through the lens of the cross.*

### **What is love?**

Christians talk about 'love' a lot. But do we ever stop to think about what we mean by love? Do we ever ask, what love is? Surely, if this is something that defines what it is to be Christian we should be keen to think about it and understand it.

Now when people talk about love they are often referring to romantic love, to being in love with one other person. That is of course something important, but it is a special type of love for a unique kind of relationship.

The Bible talks about romance, but it talks much more about love within community. Not an exclusive love, but one that is for all of our relationships.

So what does the Bible say about this broader non-romantic love? Well 1 John 3:16 give us a clear answer:

"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us." (1 John 3:16)

In other words, if we want to really know what love is, then we need to look at it through the lens of the cross. And that is what John wants to do in his letter.

So let's dive in and see what we can learn about love from this part of John's letter. I've got 10 C's. Not a complete study of love, but I hope a good start!

### **Love is...**

#### **1. Central to Christian living - 3:11**

First of all, love is central or foundational to Christianity. In verse 11, John says,

"This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another." (1 John 3:11)

Jesus said the greatest commandments were all about love. We need to love God, we need to love our neighbour.

In John's Gospel on the night before he is crucified he tells the disciples that he is giving them a new command, "To love one another."

Since love is so central to how we live as Christians, then we must surely want to be clear in our minds what it means to love. So let's move on!

#### **2. a Contrast to Hatred - 3:12-15**

Secondly love is a contrast to hatred. In verses 12-15, just before the passage we had read, and after reminding us that we should love one another, John gives us an example of the opposite of loving our brothers and sisters. It is the archetypal story of hatred in Genesis 4. Cain and Abel were brothers. They both made sacrifices to God, but Abel's sacrifice was more pleasing to God than Cain's and so Cain became jealous. Despite God warning Cain, he allowed his jealousy to turn into hatred and he murdered his brother Abel.

Sadly, this kind of hatred has plagued humanity throughout its history. This week we had the conviction of the police officer who murdered George Floyd, a murder rooted in racism, which is one form of hatred. We also had the anniversary of Stephen Lawrence's murder another example of hatred.

Of course, Jesus's death on the cross, was also an act of hatred and brutality and John tells us we shouldn't be surprised if as Christians we are the objects of hatred.

All of this may seem extreme, but John says in verse 15:

"Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him." (John 3:15)

Hatred may not lead to murder, but if our hearts hate someone, then in a sense they want rid of them or to silence or suppress them. Hatred may not lead to murder, but it can show itself in hostility, angry outbursts, name calling and so on.

Whatever love is, it is not this! Yet, as Christians we can sadly be drawn into these kinds of attitudes and behaviours because of disagreements, factions and jealousy within and between churches. We must be very careful not to go the way of Cain, a way that leads to death not life.

### **3. Chosen not coerced - 3:16**

Thirdly, love is chosen not coerced. It says in 3:16, that Jesus laid down his life. It was his choice to do so. Although it looked like he had no choice and he was at the mercy of the soldiers and authorities, the reality was he could have called on legions of angels to rescue him at any time. His actions were motivated by love not fear.

The reality is that some relationships can be abusive. If we find ourselves being forced to do things by another person that are hard or demeaning out of fear of what they might do if we don't do it, then that is not love it is fear. The call to love is not a call to be abused or manipulated by others.

### **4. Creating something good for the other - 3:16**

Rather, love is about creating something good for the other or at least aiming to do so. In 3:16 it says Jesus laid down his life 'for us'. He achieved something that we needed. Elsewhere in John it reminds us of some of what Jesus achieved through his death on the cross:

"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. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:9-10)

Now notice that what Jesus does for us in the cross is not give us what we think we want or need, but what we actually needed. If you asked most non-Christians in the street what they needed, they might say to win the lottery or to find the perfect partner. I would be surprised if they said, forgiveness from God and eternal life! But that is what Jesus did for us on the cross!

So often we associate love with giving people what they want or ask for. Certainly we should listen to people carefully and they will often know what they need more than we do, but true love does not mean always giving in to people's requests. After all it is not loving to give a child sweets whenever they ask or an alcoholic drink if they ask for it. Sometimes love involves spending time with people to see what they really need - even when they don't realise it themselves.

These days it often feels that our society says that love is affirming people in whatever they have chosen to do or however they have chosen to live. If we dare to suggest there may be something wrong with the way they have acted it is often seen as unloving or worse.

Yet, the cross rescues us from our sins. It does not support us no matter how we have lived. True love, according to the Bible is not about affirming people in everything they do, it is about helping them to transform to be the kind of people God made them to be and that can involve at the right time and in the right way challenging them about their lifestyles.

#### **5. Costly - 3:16**

If that sounds difficult and hard, then it reminds us that true love is costly, our fifth point. The cross was costly for Jesus. He had to lay down his life, he had to die and John says we need to do the same.

That is quite shocking. When we associate love with just being nice, then that feels easy and do-able. However, when we see it is a call to sacrifice - everything, then that is more of a challenge. Yet, that is what Jesus did for us.

True love is sacrificial, it means being willing to give anything up, even our lives for the good of another. Jesus was willing to pay that cost for you. Are you willing to pay that cost for others?

#### **6. Concrete Action Now - 3:17-18**

If verse 16 is the high ideal, then verse 17 brings us back down to earth. Yes, the idea of laying down one's life is a big challenge, but when the possibility of actually having to die for another is a remote one, then most of us can accept the high ideal. But John does not let us get away with that.

He calls us to concrete action now. Love is costly and actually it will cost you in everyday terms. In John's time material need was a much bigger concern than in our society and so his challenge is to be willing to support others with goods. And we need to do that today, although our financial giving may well be to support the much greater poverty in other parts of the world as well as some of the more local material need.

Yet, today, perhaps people's needs are not so much material as for time or emotional support. Offering this is also costly. Now, John says of material possessions that it is those that have that should give to those who haven't. In the same way we cannot give time we don't have or emotional energy we don't have. Yet, where we do have time or emotional energy, let's be willing to be sacrificial with them for the good of others.

As we come out of lockdown, there will be some who have had a lot less to do and have come to quite enjoy that. Some who have helped with church activities will find it hard to go back to volunteering after such a long rest. It will feel more like a sacrifice than before! But this is what it means to love. It means to be willing to take action now.

#### **7. Compassionate - 3:17**

So, love is about action, but we must not forget, that it is also about an emotional connection with people's needs. In verse 17, the Greek literally says,

"... if anyone... sees his brother in need and locks his bowels from him,  
how can the love of God be in him."

In the Bible 'the bowels' are the seat of emotion. Perhaps a better English translation might be:

"...if anyone... sees his brother in need and does not let his heart go out to him,  
how can the love of God be in him."

Jesus is often described as having compassion for people in need and his death on the cross was not a sacrifice devoid of emotion, it was out of compassion for humanity's plight in sin and death. Love is

more than a feeling, but it is certainly not emotionless. Let's allow compassion to arise in our hearts when we see the needs of others.

#### **8. Combined with Truth - 3:19-4:6**

Verse 18, calls us to love with action and truth. In verse 23, it says there is one command with two parts, to love and to believe in a truth: that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

These days, love and truth are often contrasted. Speaking the truth to people is seen as critical and harsh and it can certainly be done in hateful and uncaring ways.

But for the Bible love and truth go together. To tell someone the truth is the loving thing to do, even if it is a truth they do not want to hear.

That is why to tell someone about the good news of Jesus Christ is a loving thing to do, even if it might not be a truth they want to hear. Of course to do so can be costly, it can take courage and bravery, but it then the cross shows us that love is courageous and brave.

#### **9. Confidence in our faith - 3:19**

Ninthly, when we love others, it gives us confidence in our faith. It's when we love others as Christ loved us, then we see clearly that we are one of God's children and can approach him with confidence in prayer.

Of course, sometimes we will fail to love and that can bring doubts in our minds about our status with God. It can knock our confidence, but verse 20 reminds us that ultimately, it is not what we feel or think we know that matters, but God who is greater than our hearts and knows everything. He knows that we fundamentally believe, even when we are feeling a bit of a failure! And after all as it says at the start of John's gospel:

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:8-9)

When we love as God loves us we grow in confidence in our faith, but our failures do not mean we have lost our place with him - far from it!

#### **10. a Community of joy - 1:3-4**

Finally, not only does loving others as Christ loves us build our confidence in faith it also builds our joy at being in community. Yes, to love can be costly and demanding, but it always pulls us in more closely with the community of God's people and gives us a real sense of joy. And that is what John wants for his readers:

"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete." (1 John 1:3-4)

So let's love and discover a new joy in life!

We've covered a lot of ground. There's too much to take everything in, but as I leave the ten points on the screen for a moment, can I invite you just to reflect on the one point that God wants to emphasise to you today...