

The Way of Cain or the Way of Christ? | Reading 1 John 3:11-18

Intro: From the Beginning

“For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning.” The false teachers had been boasting about their new knowledge, so again John appeals to the original & enduring gospel. In contrast to the secret & private enlightenment which the false teaches claimed, the true message had been heard publically & openly & remained as it was from the beginning. The gospel does not change, ever. Yet the gospel does change us from the inside out! The truth about the person & work of Jesus & about Christian conduct is settled truth. What John wrote concerning obedience in 2:7 & then concerning doctrine in 2:14 he now applies to love. If we want to know what true Christians believe & how true Christians conduct themselves we need to go back to the same source – the message heard from the beginning. This is about relying on the sufficiency of the gospel to produce right thinking, living & loving in our lives.

John has been talking about righteousness... & in 3:10 he shifts focus very quickly to love; **“By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not from God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.”** This indicates very strongly that the habits produced by the gospel in the lives of God’s children are habits righteousness & love. Righteousness & love ought to co-exist in the children of God, **“for God’s seed abides in”** us. The apostle James puts it this way in James 1:27; **“Religion that is pure & undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans & widows in their affliction (LOVE), & to keep oneself unstained from the world (RIGHTEOUSNESS).”**

It also needs to be noted that the love John mentions here is that the Christian should **“love his brother”**. Throughout this letter John uses the word brother to specifically speak off fellow Christians, & here in verse 11 he mention that **“we should love one another”** which of course is a direct reference to Christ’s new commandment & one which resounds through the NT letters. In order to help us understand our call to love one another John in these verses contrasts the way of Cain with the way of Christ. John loves his contrasts – darkness/light, denying sin/confessing sin, keeping commandments/not keeping them, those who love the world/those who love the Father, antichrists/Christ, confident at his coming/ashamed at it, practicing righteousness/practicing sin, children of the devil/children of God & now it’s loving one’s brother or hating him & to bring this home he contrasts the way of Cain with the way of Christ.

1. The Way of Cain (11-15)

These verses are about who & what Christians SHOULD NOT be like. John writes in V12 **“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.”** The scary thing is that Scripture presents Cain as

someone who outwardly worshipped, yet his murderous actions revealed he was inwardly a child of the devil (cf. Gen 4). John makes that link here! Then following the teaching of Jesus in *The Sermon on the Mount* John in verse 15 links murder & hating; **“Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, & you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”** John Stott notes that; *“Jealousy lay behind [Cain’s] hatred, not the jealousy which covets another’s greater gifts but that which resents another’s greater righteousness, the ‘envy’ which made the Jewish priests demand the death of Jesus. Jealousy-hatred-murder is a natural and terrible sequence.”* This is what John wants us to see.

Hate flows from jealousy & resentment. Hate kills. It murders, it butchers, it slays & it slaughters. It always has the ruin of another person as its goal. Even when hate doesn’t go to the extent of literal murder it can still seek to kill in many other ways. It can seek to butcher people’s reputation, it can seek to slay their happiness, & it can seek to slaughter their relationships & prospects. Cain is held up here as a picture of hatred & as a picture of what we should not be like & as a picture of the world at its worst...

John gives a quick side point in verse 13 because as well as sowing us what we should not be like, Cain’s hatred also shows us what to expect from the world if we walk in righteousness. I read the following Tweet during the week; *“That Christians have been hated is not necessarily a sign of faithfulness; but if Christians are faithful, they will be hated.”* As John wrote in 3:1 **“The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.”** Then here he writes **“Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.”** So we could say the world doesn’t get us or like us. If it gets us & likes us then we are probably doing something wrong. According to John Cain represents a world system whose deeds are evil & therefore it hates the righteousness produced from those abiding in Christ. As Jesus said following his parable on the True Vine; **“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.”** Keeping the word of Jesus & his apostles means keeping to the teaching of Jesus & his apostles when it comes to John’s three tests of doctrine, obedience & love (23-24). R. C. Sproul writes; *“The greatest weakness in the church today is that the servants of God keep looking over their shoulder for the approval of men.”* The apostle Paul writes; **“For I am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ”** (Gal 1:10).

Louie Giglio writes; *“There is a price that must be paid to know God in a fallen world.”* That price is that if we walk with God in righteousness there will be times when we feel the heat of the world’s hatred & in such times we need to know just as God was with Shadrach, Meshach & Abednego in the furnace so he is with us. And if all this is true then the last thing a professing Christian should be found doing is joining the

world in hating brothers & sisters in Christ. So John returns to his main point in verse 14; **“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.”**

Yes we are called to love all (including enemies & those who hate us) but the love John talks about here is specifically love for brothers, John always uses brothers to refer to other Christians. Loving Jesus but not the Church is not an option in authentic Christianity. John has very deliberately used the story of Cain murdering his brother to illustrate & underline this. He could have picked any analogy from the OT but he particularly chose one about two brothers because he is primarily taking about loving brothers & sisters in Christ. And he says it is by our love for them that we know we have passed from death to life (yet another contrast). Are you spiritually dead or alive? Do you love your Christian brothers & sisters? Same question in John’s mind. Cain wanted rid of his brothers & if we reflect him by wishing we could get shot of brothers & sisters in Christ then there is something wrong. Daniel Akin comments on this verse; *“As I love my brothers & sisters in the community of faith... I am assured I am in the family of God.”*

Look at the next verse; **“Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”** John makes the same point the other way round. In verse 14 love for our brothers is proof that we’ve passed from death into life, in verse 15 hate for our brother is evidence we’re void of the eternal kind of life. Yet also note that John moves from plural to singular as it moves from verse 14-15 (he will do the exact same thing between verses 16 & 17). C. S. Lewis once wrote; *“It’s easier to be enthusiastic about Humanity with a capital “H” than it is to love individual men & women, especially those who are uninteresting, exasperating, depraved, or otherwise unattractive. Loving everyone in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular.”* Church is God’s way of making sure that does not happen. The very nature of grace & church gives us particular brothers & sisters to love, individual men & women! And John says this is where the rubber hits the road when it comes to possessing eternal life!

If someone cannot abide brothers & sisters in Christ then John says they do not have eternal life abiding in them. In fact he says it much stronger than that. Hatred for a brother or sister in Christ cannot coexist with the eternal kind of life... It’s in church, in fellowship with brothers & sisters in Christ, that we learn to love specific individuals as Christ has loved us, & we don’t get to choose the individuals, he does! To walk away from church is to walk away from Christ’s great means of spiritual growth. It’s to basically say, *“I don’t want to learn to love others the way you have loved me.”* And how did Christ love us?

2. The Way of Christ (16-18)

What we see here is that while hate murders love sacrifices, while hate would seek to destroy love seeks to save & while hate would take the life of another love lays down its life for others. John says this is what we ought to do. What a contrast between the way of Cain & the way of Christ! After giving us a picture of

what we should not be like he gives us a picture of what we ought to be like & the picture he gives is Christ laying down his life for us on the Cross! **“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.”**

Having shown that love is the evidence of eternal life John shows us the essence of eternal life. Love at its core is about self-sacrifice & self-substitution. Daniel Akin writes; *“Many have noticed the beautiful relationship that exists between John 3:16 & 1 John 3:16. The former is a demonstration of love. The latter is an explanation of love. John 3:16 says God gave his son for us. 1 John 3:16 says we should give ourselves for others. The Bible says that if you want to see love, look at the cross! The Bible says that if you want to show love, look at the cross! The Bible says that if you want to know love, look at the cross. The Bible says that if you want to live love, look at the cross.”*

This is how we are to love our brothers – other Christians, one another – with this radical love! The cross should be reflected in our relationships & attitudes & dealings with one another. Think about what that means... And again between verses 16-17 John moves from plural to singular because he doesn't only want us think about this in a general & ultimate sense. He also wants us to think about the individual brothers & sisters we are called to do Christianity with. He wants us to have one another in mind. He wants us to see that this cross shaped love is worked out in a million little ways, not only in great sacrifices. So as well as giving the ultimate picture, which our lives should reflect, John also gives us very down to earth application for what this looks like in everyday life; **“But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need (may God open our eyes), yet closes his heart against him (may God soften our hearts), how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word of talk but in deed and in truth.”** In others in actions & with the right motivation! Love is not only the opposite of hate but also of indifference.

Conclusion: Hope for Loveless Hearts

Do our hearts reflect Cain or Christ? This is what John wants us to consider. However while John wants to challenge fake worshippers like Cain he is also aware that his teaching may unsettle true believers who are deeply challenged by the extent of this call to love one another. If we are deeply challenged that is a good sign, if we are unmoved that is more concerning. I am deeply challenged about how little my love reflects his, but I do not feel condemned. Here is why. **Look at verses 19-20 which we'll get into more next time.** Note that little phrase in verse 20; **“whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our hearts”** (cf. 2:1-2). One thing that this means is this; even though our heart often lacks the love we're thinking off, God's grace is greater & it is he & he alone who can produce his greater love in us. We have somewhere to turn today, to one who can produce in our hearts what we never could. The gospel frees us to face our often loveless with the hope that God can produce in us what we cannot. He can uproot the Cain like weeds from our hearts & in their place plant the abiding & more powerful seed of Christ-like love.