

November 15 Lesson 11 (NIV)

CONFIDENT LOVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Hebrews 13:1–8

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 1 John 3:11–24; 2 John 4–11; 3 John 5–8

1 JOHN 3:11–24

¹¹ 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.

¹⁹ This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: ²⁰ If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God ²² and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. ²³ And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. ²⁴ The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

KEY VERSE

The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us. —1 John 3:24

LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER

Unit 3: Godly Love Among Believers

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HOW TO SAY IT

Ephesus *Ef*-uh-sus.

Galilee *Gal*-uh-lee.

gnostics *nah*ss-ticks.

Introduction

A. Hated by the World

Blogger Carey Nieuwhof has written that non-Christians hate Christians because they think they are judgmental, hypocritical, and insincere friends. But history tells the stories of many Christians who were none of these things. We can find many examples in our churches today of Christians who refuse to be judgmental, whose lives are not hypocritical, and whose friendships are sincere both with believers and nonbelievers. Still, some of these exemplary folks suffer persecution, even death. There must be a deeper dynamic here.

Most Christians have plenty of room to be more Christlike in our relationships with non-Christians. But nothing we do will earn the world's love. This was also true for John's readers. What is to be done in a seemingly no-win situation?

B. Lesson Context

The three letters of John were likely written about the same time as the Gospel of John, in the AD 80s or 90s. The letters reflect a personal relationship with the readers, like a pastor writing to his flock. Indeed, early Christian sources indicate that the apostle John left Jerusalem and his home region of Galilee to settle in the city of Ephesus. Paul had founded the church of Ephesus in the mid-50s on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:1–22). The city had become a center of Christian activity, and this was strengthened by the arrival of John 15 to 20 years after Paul. At the time of the writing of 1 John, the apostle had served as a pastor for the Ephesians for more than a decade.

John wrote as the senior statesman of the church, likely the last living of the 12 original apostles. First John contains a wide range of topics that summarize the aged apostle's teachings and advice for his beloved "children," the Christians of Ephesus. The letters of John deal with factions within and outside the church of Ephesus, which had begun to teach many false things (examples: 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3). Included in this list were things like the denial of the true humanity of Christ (and therefore his atoning death), of the reality of sin in the lives of the teachers, and of the assurance of salvation for believers as taught by Jesus.

John wrote this epistle against a background of false teachers who came to be known as gnostics. Among other things, gnostics taught that it did not really matter if a person had morality or love—as long as he or she had "secret knowledge." To combat this false teaching, John emphasized the interconnection of right belief, right actions, and right love. To put it another way, it is the right involvement of head, hands, and heart. The child of God must believe the truth, obey the commands, and love brothers and sisters in Christ.

John showed that such threats to the faith must be dealt with firmly and without compromise, yet with a spirit of love. Christians cannot return hate and abuse with more hate and abuse. Even in the most contentious relationships, love must prevail. Surely this applied to John himself, whose teachings were under attack by these heretics. His original readers may have witnessed firsthand his response to his antagonists, and if this had been anything but love, the message of 1 John would have a hollow ring.

John demonstrated that if we are in the right and "walk in [the truth]" (3 John 3), we can bring great confidence to our relationship with anyone. This is not arrogance or elitism, but inner strength that does not depend on the approval of others for personal well-being.

I. Cain's Example (1 JOHN 3:11–15)

A. Loving from the Beginning (v. 11)

11. For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.

The beginning for John refers to his original teachings among his readers. His *message* has not evolved or changed, and the basic message is still that *we should love one another*. Furthermore, this key concept can be found in the teachings of Jesus (see John 13:34–35). These words of his master made a strong impression on the young John 50 years earlier, and he never forgot them. He does not want his readers to forget or neglect them either.

B. Lifeless like Murderers (vv. 12–15)

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.

While we usually see hate as the opposite of love, John gives a biblical example that shows the complexity of our relationships. Why would we hate another person? In the story of *Cain* and *his brother*, Abel, there was an underlying dynamic of jealousy. God judged Cain's offering of agricultural products to be *evil*, while Abel's offering of choice portions from the animals of his flock were deemed *righteous* (Genesis 4:1–5).

We know from the later laws of Israel that a “grain offering” was not repugnant to the Lord (see Leviticus 6:14; Numbers 4:16), so the fault of Cain was in the unrighteous condition of his heart. John's point is that Cain's actions confirmed his evil heart. His jealousy grew to hatred and resulted in *murder*.

13. Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.

When John wrote of *the world*, he meant something more specific (and sinister) than the general populace. The world represents those who are in rebellion against God, defiantly sinning against God's commands. They have rejected God's rules for living and resent any restrictions on their freedom to sin.

The world's hatred for the church flows out of its hatred for God himself. The people of God will never be accepted by those who reject God. Such hatred of the righteous by the unrighteous has changed little in the thousands of years since Cain and Abel. This ancient dynamic persists in the way the world views the church.

14a. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other.

While the world is dead in its wickedness and hatred, believers *have passed from death to life*. This fact calls and then empowers Christians to *love each other*, a sign of genuine life in Christ. Our assurance of salvation is based on more than our love for Jesus. We cannot claim to love the Lord while hating others. This reinforces what John has already taught about the world. The world hates Christians because it hates Jesus.

Hate, of course, may seem strong to describe the world's reaction to Christ. Some people genuinely seem to respect Jesus as a philosopher or even prophet who had important things to say. However, by rejecting his claim that he is the Son of God who redeems people from their sins, they fail to love him as they ought. For this reason, the world dwells in death when it could pass into life, if only it would love Jesus and accept his lordship.

The hatred of Cain is an old story, and the hatred of the world is probably not surprising. But what about hatred within the family of God? It is inconceivable! If a believer doesn't love other members of Christ's body, it signifies that such a person either has never come all the way into life or has gone back and now abides in death.

14b. Anyone who does not love remains in death.

This verse represents an absolute truth for Christians: if you hate your brothers and sisters in the faith, you remain *in death*, spiritual separation from God. Such people have not experienced the eternal life promised to those who put their faith in Jesus (see John 5:24). They are still under condemnation because of sin (3:18).

15. Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.

Jesus taught that anger and disrespectful behavior are comparable to murder (Matthew 5:21–22). Anger and hate feed one another. Human anger does not produce God’s righteousness (James 1:20). Unchecked and unresolved anger may indeed lead to violence and even murder, things that should have no place in the church.

Though murder can be coldly calculated (and thus reveal a horrifying depth of hatred), more often it is a crime of passion committed in a fit of anger and hate. This was the case with Cain, who seethed with anger against God and his brother (Genesis 4:5–6). The Lord described this deadly mix of animosity as “sin ... at your door” (4:7).

II. Christ’s Sacrifice

(1 JOHN 3:16–18)

A. Imitate Jesus (v. 16)

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.

Jesus’ Jewish opponents hounded and threatened him throughout his ministry (example: John 11:8). If Jesus had decided to let his emotions turn to murderous hate, he had far greater resources than whatever murder weapon Cain used. Jesus could have summoned thousands of warrior angels to exact his vengeance (Matthew 26:53). But he didn’t. Instead, he willingly died for the sake of all people, including his killers (Luke 23:34), John’s first-century readers, and even us. Jesus acted out his love with willing purpose, the polar opposite of the angry hate of a murderer.

Thus the first measure of *love* is a practical test. When God loved the world, he sent Heaven’s greatest gift. Jesus came and *laid down his life for us*—unrepentant enemies of God (see John 3:16; Romans 5:8, 10; Colossians 1:21–22). Love like God’s love could give nothing less. God’s children should resemble their Father in this kind of love. We should be willing to do just about anything *for our brothers and sisters*.

B. Demonstrate Love (vv. 17–18)

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?

Today we might talk about hardening one’s heart when we talk about feeling *no pity* for someone (compare Exodus 8:15; 9:34; 2 Corinthians 6:11). Jesus’ death for his brothers and sisters serves as the ultimate act of love, in contrast to Cain’s act of hate.

John pushed this to a smaller scale, something within his readers’ daily experience. Most of us will not literally die for others (compare Matthew 16:24–27), yet we have opportunities daily to give of our livelihoods, our *material possessions*, to help those *in need*. Love, like faith, requires evidence in our actions (James 2:15–17). When we accept *the love of God*, we also take the responsibility to prove that love in our relationships with others.

18. Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

Any claim for loving God should result in observable deeds of compassion for others. Lack of concern for the needy brings the entire status of a Christian into question. John used *truth* here in the sense of veracity, of verifiable actions. He also taught that love for God and hate for others cannot coexist (1 John 4:20).

John knows that these stern words might convict some of their unfaithful deeds, so he spoke with urgency to his *dear children*, his beloved flock. Although false teachers seemed unworried about physical actions as evidence of faith, John insisted that loving behavior is the only way to really demonstrate love in one's heart.

III. Faith's Test

(1 JOHN 3:19–24)

A. Of the Heart (vv. 19–22)

19. This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence:

John offers a test to determine whether *we belong to the truth* (see 1 John 3:20 commentary, below). To belong to truth is John's way of saying our actions prove we are not acting with guile or deceit, but with godly sincerity and honesty.

We should pay attention to *our hearts*, but not as an infallible guide. The heart in biblical thought is not simply the center of emotions. The heart is the source of our deepest impulses, our motivations, our freewill decisions. It is where we make choices.

20. If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

Here, a heart that condemns may be rightly convicting us of sin that has not been rooted out. This seems especially to be what John had in mind; *if our hearts condemn us*, then *God* has even more reason to condemn us because he sees *our hearts* even more clearly than we do!

Yet John's encouragement is that *God is greater than our hearts*. Our inner voice can be misleading, an embodiment of our self-centered tendencies or shameful previous behavior. God sees not only what our hearts tell us, but also what he knows about us. His great love does not condemn us when we are in Christ.

21. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God

If our hearts do not condemn us—do not resist helping the needy with acts of love—we should feel *confidence* in our relationship with *God*. We have tamed the heart of stony selfishness and allowed it to be a soft heart of obedience and kindness. The hard heart is liable for the judgmental wrath of God (see Romans 2:5). When we act in kindness for others, we show that we have a new heart, the heart recreated by God's grace (see Psalm 51:10; Ezekiel 11:19).

22. and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him.

The path forward for the believer is to *ask* the right things of God and to *do* the right things for God (see John 15:7; lesson 10). We are self-testing when we look at these things critically. When we pray, do we pray for things necessary to do God's will? When we act, do our actions please God rather than disappoint him?

B. Of Actions (vv. 23–24)

23a. And this is his command:

The *command* that John stated here did not come from the apostle but from God.

23b. to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.

To *believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ* (compare John 6:29) and to *love one another* cannot be disconnected from each other. True believers in Jesus Christ will practice mutual love always. Jesus mentioned this repeatedly on the final night he spent with his disciples in the upper room (see John 13:34; 15:12, 17). Many decades later, John showed us that he had not forgotten his master's words of that night. Despite the many problems and challenges of the church(es) John addressed, this controlling ethic never lost its power or authority.

Although there are many layers to John's teachings, he often simplified his discussions to essential basics at appropriate places. Pleasing God requires a clean heart that acts with love for others. This is the act of surrender, of putting full trust in Jesus with a heart that is willing to follow his teachings. John only taught his "dear children" (1 John 3:18; see commentary above) what Jesus taught him.

24. The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

We know we are in fellowship with God if we keep his *commands*. We see evidence of our obedience when our lives show that we are loving one another faithfully. *The Spirit* abides in us, changing our hearts so that we keep the commands from pure motives, not just fear of punishment.

A loving church that serves the needy of its community gives witness to the Spirit of God in its midst. We please the Father when we follow the teachings of his Son and allow his Spirit to guide our acts of love for others.

Conclusion

A. Evidence Required

A few years ago, my wife had knee-replacement surgery. I chose not to witness the procedure. When she came back to her room, I could see incisions and stitches, but I could not see an artificial appliance made of metal and plastic under her skin. A small, paranoid part of me wondered briefly if it was all fake. Maybe the surgeon and hospital conspired to make a few cuts to give the appearance of surgery, charged thousands of dollars, and left her old, worn-out knee intact.

It takes time to recover from this operation. At first, the pain of healing outweighed the previous pain of a crippled knee. Gradually, though, her knee got better. Now, after complete recovery, she has much better mobility and much less pain than before. Even though I did not see it placed there and cannot see it now, I know there is a new knee in my wife's right leg. I witness the evidence every day.

John asks if we love God. He insists we cannot make a credible claim to loving God if we hate other people. Furthermore, we cannot claim to love other people without evidence. Does the love of God in our hearts result in acts of kindness toward others?

Cain's heart of hate and anger resulted in murder, a heinous but accurate reflection of his inner thoughts. Jesus Christ's heart of love resulted in the willing sacrifice of his life as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29), the same world that John warns will hate Jesus' followers (1 John 3:13). The paradox is profound, but the evidence is there with Jesus. While we were his enemies, he died for us (Romans 5:8–10).

What does the evidence of our lives reveal about the secrets of our hearts?

B. Prayer

Loving Father, when the world hates us, comfort us with your love. Give us the presence of your Holy Spirit and new hearts that love one another and show our love in our actions. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Loving God is shown by loving people.¹
