

Love & Hate=Life Or Death Indicators

1 John 3:11-24

For those who read my dear wife's facebook page this week, you know that she is doing what many of y'all are also doing, getting ready for school. Homeschoolers are busy this time of year ordering text books and public and Christian school students are busy buying the list of needed school supplies. As I thought of the school year starting, a simple science lesson came to mind that helps to illustrate the important lesson we will learn today from 1 John 3:11-24.

In science, there are several tests used to indicate the presence or absence of a physical substance. For example, I have here two jars full of different clear liquids. One jar contains an acidic solution. The other jar contains ammonia, a basic solution. I want to know which jar contains Ammonia. Phenol Red is a substance that can be added to an unknown liquid to indicate the presence of an acidic or basic solution. If a basic substance is present, the jar will turn a pinkish color. If an acidic substance is present, the jar will turn more of a yellowish color. Let's use a couple drops of Phenol Red as an indicator as to which jar contains Ammonia.

In the physical world, there are indicators to demonstrate the presence or absence of a substance as we have just observed. Likewise, in the spiritual world, there is an equally conclusive test we can apply to our life that will serve to indicate the presence of eternal life in us or the fact that we remain spiritually dead. The test is simple: Do we characteristically demonstrate love towards believers in Christ? If characteristic love of believers is present, it serves to indicate that we have eternal life through faith in Christ. If characteristic love is absent and instead we are characterized by hatred for believers in Christ, then it serves to indicate that we remain in spiritual death.

We've heard it before, but it needs repeating, we should love one another (3:11)

John introduces verse 11 with the words, "This is the message." The phrase "this is the message" or "this is the testimony" is used by John as an indicator that he is moving from one major division of his letter to the next. The central theme of 1 John is that in order for us to enjoy fully our fellowship with God, we need to be in sync with who He is, we need to be like Him. In 1 John 1:5-3:10, we have learned that in order for us to enjoy fellowship with a holy God, we must be holy. In 1 John 3:11-5:10, John instructs us that in order for us to enjoy fellowship with a God who is love, we must love our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Ever since the beginning of their Christian life, John's readers have heard the proclamation of their responsibility to love one another. This is not a new requirement, but a longstanding one. It is a requirement that involves no conditions or limitations as John reminds us of our responsibility to love one another continually by his use of the present tense in the Greek.

Our love cannot be reserved for only some occasions and not others or for only some of our brothers and sisters in Christ and not others. If we are to enjoy fellowship with God, we must show love towards other believers—all of them, all of the time.

Cain illustrates how not to act: His actions demonstrate he belonged to the evil one and shared the world's attitude towards God's children (3:12-13)

Cain didn't love his brother, but killed him. The total absence of love for his brother in Cain serves as an indicator that he belonged to the evil one, that he was one of Satan's children. Cain's actions both originated and drew their inspiration from the devil, his spiritual father, who is described in Scripture as a murderer (John 8:44).

Cain murdered Abel out of resentment of his brother's righteousness

John asks a rhetorical question, "And why did he murder him?" and then answers it, "Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous." Abel, in faith, offered the first and best of his flock to God in obedience to Him. Cain, on the other hand, offered only some of the fruits of the soil. He didn't demonstrate faith in God by offering the first and best of his crop. The righteous deeds of Abel exposed the unrighteousness and evil in Cain. God warned Cain that sin was crouching at the door and encouraged him to do right. Instead of heeding God's warning, Cain allowed resentment toward Abel to build within him to the point that it eventually led him to murder his brother. Cain chose not to do things God's way. He chose not to respond in faith towards God and resented how Abel's totally different response brought his evil to light. Cain decided to destroy Abel for exposing his sin rather than joining him in trusting God and doing what is right.

God's children should stop being surprised at the world's hatred

When we are the objects of unprovoked hatred, we shouldn't let it surprise us. Just as Abel's righteous behavior and character aroused the hatred of his brother Cain, so our righteous character and conduct is sure to arouse the world's hatred of us. The world is alienated from God and acts in opposition to Him—why would we expect anything but hatred from those who are part of this system? The world, rather than joining us in trusting Christ and faithfully following Him in doing what is right will respond by trying to get rid of us for exposing and interfering with their evil practices. John's prohibition here not to let the world's hatred surprise us echoes the teaching of Jesus.

John 15:18-21—"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you, 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."

Our love for one another or the absence of the same indicates whether or not we have eternal life (3:14-15)

The characteristic practice of love or hatred within us reveals about us whether we have eternal life or are still spiritually dead.

We know we have passed from death to life when we characteristically love our brothers

Jesus promised in John 5:24- "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." Those who believe the Father's testimony of who Jesus is, those who respond in faith to Him, will cross over from death to life. Those who characteristically love their brothers in Christ thereby give evidence to the fact that this transfer from the realm of death to eternal life has already taken place in their lives. How is love evidence of this fact? As we have already established, people of the world won't give this response. The devil's children will hate God's children. Only God's children will love God's children.

We need to be careful here. Our love is evidence of our having eternal life, not the means by which we require it. Just the same, how we characteristically act will show what we are. If we characteristically love, it will show we are believers who have eternal life.

I remember a time when my wife scarred me to death and passed out. At the time, I really didn't know if she was alive or dead. I am glad I only was left to wonder for several seconds. You can imagine my joy when she demonstrated the signs of life by moving, breathing, and talking to me. Just as there are signs that we look for that when present demonstrate that physical life is there, there are also signs we look for that when present demonstrate that eternal life is the possession of an individual. Those who characteristically love their brothers in Christ show they have eternal life.

We know that we remain in death when we characteristically don't love our brothers

The absence of love as a characteristic of our life reveals we are still spiritually dead and alienated from God. Whatever we may claim, the proof of where we are at spiritually is in how we live.

Characteristic hatred of a brother is the same as murder and indicates the absence of eternal life

In His Sermon on the Mount, our Lord taught that the commandment not to murder not only extended to the act itself, but also the attitude behind the act.

Matthew 5:21-22- “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

In a similar vein, John teaches that the person who characteristically hates his brother is a murderer. Hatred and murder are morally equivalent. The inward intent and attitude of the murderer and the one who hates people is the same. The attitude behind murder is just as bad as the act itself.

Does this mean that a person who has had an episode within his or her life and struggled with hating a particular brother is then a murderer and without eternal life? Once again, John implements the substantive use of the present tense participle to make his point. It is the person who is characterized by a settled habit of hating his brothers who is a murderer and without eternal life. The fact of our having an occasional struggle loving a brother doesn't mean we don't have eternal life. Such a struggle will leave us out of close fellowship with God and make us miserable, but if it is an occasional struggle and not a pattern, it doesn't necessarily mean we are without eternal life.

When John says, “No murderer has eternal life in him” what does he mean? John isn't saying that a murderer can't be saved. How do we know this? The Apostle Paul had a part in the stoning of Stephen. Just the same, it is clear that by God's grace, Paul, a murderer was saved. What John is saying is that a person who hates his brother and is thereby a murderer as a habit or settled pattern isn't a believer and therefore doesn't have eternal life.

We are to love, following Christ's example (3:16)

Okay, we know we need to love in order to enjoy fellowship with God and our doing so as a characteristic of life demonstrates we have genuinely trusted Christ and have eternal life. How are we able to know definitively what love is?

Christ's example shows us what love is: He voluntarily laid down His life for us

The test of Christian love as the demonstration of our being one of God's children and a possessor of eternal life involves not only the omission of our doing evil towards others (i.e. We don't kill and hate them), but also the presence of our doing good, of our sacrificially giving of ourselves for the good of others. Whereas Cain is the example presented as to what not to do-he took a life, Christ is our example to show us what love is-He gave His life. This is love and how we are able to know what love is: Christ laid down His life for us. He died in our place. He voluntarily laid down His life for us in order that we might receive the gift of eternal life through faith in Him. If that is what Christ did for us, how much more should we be willing to do the same for our brothers in Christ?

Following Christ's example, we are to lay down our life for our brothers

We should willingly lay down our lives in sacrifice and service for the good of other believers just as our Lord did for us.

This goes completely against our natural tendency. Our natural tendency in the flesh would be for us to be most concerned about self-preservation. Our spiritual tendency after having become a child of God and transformed by Him is self-sacrifice and service for the good of others.

It's so easy for us to declare when asked about our commitment to our brothers and sisters in Christ to affirm, "Yes, I love all of God's children. I am willing to do anything for a brother in Christ." Is our declared commitment demonstrated to be a reality in us when the need of a particular brother comes to our attention?

John causes us as readers to evaluate where we are really at by going from generalities to particulars. John's broad sweeping exhortation is that we be like Christ and lay down our life for our brothers (plural). To flesh out how we are doing, to demonstrate if our commitment is really where it should be, John moves on to particulars. He brings us the scenario of a brother (singular) who is in need. How do we act then?

Please notice a couple of the important details of John's illustration. First, a believer has the material possessions to meet the need. We can't help a brother with his material needs if we don't have anything to give him. We shouldn't feel guilty if we don't give simply because we don't have what is needed to help. However, if we do have the means to help, we have an obligation to our brother.

Second, we see the need. If we are ignorant of a need and find out later, after fact, we shouldn't condemn ourselves for failing to act on that need. We can only act on the needs we know about. However, if we see a need and have the means to help, we have an obligation to our brother.

When we see a need, have the means to meet it, we should share our possessions to meet another's need as the expression of our love for our brothers. It's easy to affirm in broad stroke generalities that we love the brethren, but what happens when the rubber meets the road and we are confronted with a particular need of a brother to receive the expression of our love in tangible ways? If we refuse to act at that point, there is a problem.

If we say we love our brothers, but close our heart to our brother in need, God's love is not abiding in us (3:17-18)

We can't say God's love is abiding in us if we are not doing something about a brother's need, if we are not practically caring for the need of another member of God's family.

Our love should not be just lip service, but should be demonstrated by our deeds

It's not enough to just talk about our love for our brothers, there must be actions present in support of what we say.

Our love should not be just going through the motions, but should be demonstrated by our sincerity

While it is a common problem to declare love without acting to show our love, there is the opposite problem of just going through the motions in our actions without sincerity, without genuinely having love in our hearts for the person we are acting to help.

Loving as Christ loved us in laying down His life for us and loving in deed and in truth will cost us. We should expect sacrifice. While sacrifice isn't always pleasant or easy, the blessings God brings for obeying Him and honoring the principles of His Word will far outweigh the sacrifices on our part.

The assurances we enjoy when love is our characteristic practice:

The assurance of belonging to the truth (3:19-20)

Our characteristic practice of love in deed and in truth will produce the assurance that we are of the truth. Our love will serve as concrete evidence of our having responded in faith to the truth of God revealed in Christ and in His gospel. Characteristic love can only be explained as the fruit of the transformation God has brought to our life as His child from having responded to God's truth by trusting in His Son. Therefore, when it is present in us, it assures us of the reality of our belonging to the truth, of our salvation.

Our characteristic practice of love in deed and in truth will also serve to set our hearts at rest in God's presence. When we are loving as a pattern of our life and as the demonstration of our being in fellowship with God, we have no fear or cause for doubt. Our conscience does not then accuse us and we find ourselves confident and at ease in God's presence.

In the phrase, "whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" John provides the believer with even further assurances. We have all had occasions in life where our heart has condemned us, where our conscience has accused us, holding against us the occasions where we have done wrong or have failed to do all the good we could have done. During these times, we might lack assurance that we are of the truth and experience fear and doubt in God's presence.

Thankfully, we have John's reminder here that God is greater than our hearts and He knows everything. He knows us more deeply and accurately than we can know ourselves. He knows that when we as believers have moments of inconsistency, moments when we don't love as we should, that this action does not characterize us.

During the times we lack confidence that we belong to the truth and our hearts accuse us, we can rejoice that God's knows better about who we really are from having trusted in His Son than what our hearts will suggest when they condemn us.

John's point in verse 20 is illustrated in the life of Peter. There was a time when Peter denied the Lord three times. He failed miserably. His actions at that time did not demonstrate him to be a child of God. Later when questioned by the Lord if Peter loved Him, Peter appeals to the LORD's omniscience- "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you" (John 21:17). Peter's earlier actions did not demonstrate his love for the Lord at the time, but the Lord knew that Peter's lapse in disobedience was not the pattern of his life.

Peter drew great assurance from his understanding that the Lord knows better about who we really are from having trusted in Him than what our hearts suggest when they condemn us.

Eric Kress writes in summary of verses 19-20- "So when doubts and fears assail you concerning who you belong to—go back and think of the test of love....Does the world separate from you because of your love? Do you sacrifice for other Christians? Do you live a sincere life of love? Yet you hear the doubts and see the failures. Be encouraged. God knows all. He is greater than even our oversensitive conscience. Never quickly dismiss a guilty conscience, but always analyze your conviction in light of Scripture."

The assurance of confident access to God and answered prayers (21-23)

When we are living a life of characteristic love and demonstrating our love in deed and in truth, we will enjoy a clean conscience—our hearts will not condemn us. Such a state of heart allows us to come before God boldly and confidently. There is nothing within us that would produce shame and fear and cause us to be reticent in our approach to God. Just as relationships with other people are most enjoyable when there is nothing getting in between us, so our relationship with God is most enjoyable when there is nothing getting between us and Him, when we are able to have free and uninhibited fellowship and communion with our Lord.

Not only does our characteristic love enable us to approach God's presence confidently, but it also enables us to make requests with a sense of confidence that we will receive what we ask for. How can we be so sure our prayers will be answered? "Because we obey His commands and do what pleases Him." We need to be careful at this point. Our obedience is the condition for our having prayers answered affirmatively, it is not the cause.

When we love characteristically, we demonstrate we have obeyed the Lord by believing in the name of Jesus Christ. It is only possible to love as God would have us to because of the transformation that takes place from having trusted in Christ. When we love characteristically, we demonstrate we have obeyed the Lord in loving one another as He commanded us. When we have characteristically obeyed the Lord's commands and have done what pleases Him, we can be confident of answered prayers.

Does this mean we have a blank check and receive whatever we ask for? Does this mean I can ask for a Mercedes Benz and I'll get it? That is not what John is saying. If we are obeying God's will as demonstrated by our obedience to His commands, then we demonstrate we have a heart that will be concerned first and foremost about praying for God's will and what pleases Him. Our focus will not be on what we want, but on what He wants. Our focus will not be on us, but on the welfare of the brothers and sisters in Christ that we love. When we pray, concerned that God's will is done in us and in those around us and that things will be done that will please Him, we can be confident that our prayers will be answered, that we will receive from Him whatever we ask for.

The assurance of fellowship with God (3:24)

When we obey God by loving one another in a characteristic way in both deed and in truth in keeping with the example of our Lord, we are assured that we abide in Him and He in us. We are assured that we are in fellowship and close communion with our Lord as such love is only possible from an abiding relationship with Him. We can only live a life characterized by love when we draw from Him or depend on Him for all we need to live such a life and He supplies all we need to do so.

The assurance that the Lord abides in us is reinforced to us by the Spirit He has given us—"And This is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit He gave us." As Romans 8:16 likewise affirms for us, God's Spirit interacts with our spirit bearing witness to the fact that we are God's children.

How does all of this apply to daily life?

Let's evaluate how we respond to a brother in need and what our response indicates about us

As we established in the introduction, characteristic love and hatred are indicators of either eternal life or death residing in us? If we characteristically don't show any concern for doing something to give of ourselves to meet the needs of others, there is good reason to question if we know God, if we have come to the place of trusting in Christ as our Savior. If we are characterized by loving in action and in truth in keeping with the example of Christ, it provides us with assurances that things are right with God and that we are in fellowship. If love characterizes our life, but we haven't seen the demonstration of it this week, we need to confess our sins so as to enjoy restored fellowship with our Lord, so as to fully enjoy the assurances characteristic love brings to our life.

Let's enjoy the assurances that characteristic love brings