

Sermon Series: Balanced Spiritual Growth
Sermon: Loving the Family, 1 John 3

Main Scripture Reference: 1 John 3:11-18

All sermons in the Extra Sermon series "Balanced Spiritual Growth"

September 04 - Loving the Family (1 John 3:11-18)
September 11 - Obeying the Commandments (1 John 2:3-6)
September 18 - Making A Lasting Impact (Matthew 5:13-16)
September 25 - Bringing in the Harvest (Matthew 9:35-38)

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The Bible Study Connection for September 4, 2011: The Bible Studies for Life lesson for Sept. 4 is "Connect to CommUnity" based on Psalm 133:1-3; 1 Corinthians 12:12-18, 21-26. Unity is crucial to the success of Christianity. That unity is expressed in our love for one another. This sermon reminds us what real love looks and acts like.

Introduction: A woman was surprised at church one day when another woman, who had often snubbed her, went out of her way to give her a big hug before the service. She wondered what had initiated her change of heart. She got her answer at the end of the service when the pastor instructed, "Your assignment for next week is the same as last week. I want you to go out there and love somebody you just can't stand."

If loving others were only as easy as giving a hug to someone you don't like, we all could excel in love. Just hug them and move on! But, love is a bit more difficult than that. It requires continual effort and hard work, because at the heart of loving others is putting the other person ahead of you, and that is always a huge battle. Our default mode is to revert back to selfishness, not to love. For this reason, the New Testament as a whole and the apostle John in particular never tire of exhorting us to love the family.

John was originally known as one of the Sons of Thunder. I imagine that everywhere he went he created a storm, and when he left people were glad to see him go. But, then, Jesus' touched his life; he followed Jesus; he was changed. He became known as the Apostle of Love. After his conversion everywhere he went he brought calmness and peace, and people wanted him to stay. Love characterized his life. Love was his prevailing message.

In fact, the church father, Jerome, said that when the apostle John was in his extreme old age, he was so weak that he had to be carried into church meetings. At the end of the meeting he would be helped to his feet to give a word of exhortation to the church. Invariably, he would repeat, "Little children, let us love one another." The disciples began to grow weary of the same words every time, and they finally asked him why he always said the same thing over and over. He replied, "Because it is the Lord's commandment, and if this only is done, it is enough."

Like driving a nail into a board, John hit this commandment of love one another again and again. Five times in this letter, John reminded the reader of Jesus' command to love one another (1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 12). He wanted to make sure that we understand that love is not an optional virtue for a believer. Love is a distinguishing mark, the necessary ethic, of a Christian in the world. Later in 1 John 4:8, John delivered the final blow to the nail to say that if you do not love others, you do not know God.

Love, it is such an overused word, isn't it? We say I love my dog; I love the Gamecocks; I love the Tigers; I love cheesecake; I love a good book; I love the beach; and I love children. Love is a very misunderstood word. One woman wrote: "Dearest Ben, No words can ever express the great unhappiness I've felt since breaking our engagement. Please say that you'll take me back. No one could take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you. I love you. Yours forever, Betty. P.S. And congratulations for winning the state lottery." Love too often is thought of as a sentimental feeling or a shallow emotion. Love is much more, much deeper.

Let's look first at what love means.

I. Biblical love seeks the highest good of others.

The expanded version of the definition of love reads: Biblical love is a self-sacrificing, caring commitment that shows itself in seeking the highest good of the one loved. At its heart, biblical love is a commitment that is not without feeling; it is a caring commitment. In other words, biblical love involves delight, not just duty. Also, this caring commitment is not just an attitude, but an action; it shows itself in deeds. Those deeds often require self-sacrifice, seen supremely in Jesus' death on the cross. The goal of this commitment is the highest good of the one loved. While there are many good things love seeks to accomplish, from meeting the basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter to the higher pursuits of personal worth, value, and accomplishment, for believers the highest good is that the person becomes a Christian, taking the step of faith; and, then, begin the walk of being a Christian, conforming to the image of Jesus Christ. Thus biblical love allows for loving correction when needed.

Since biblical love is a commitment, therefore, it may be commanded. In fact,

II. Christian love fulfills the command of Jesus.

John restated the command of Jesus: "This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another" (1 John 3:11 NIV). John was not making up this command. He did not originate the idea of loving one another. Love originates with God. The command to love one another comes from the lips of Jesus, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35 NIV). Jesus instructed his followers to love one another. It is basic and fundamental to believers' walk with Christ. Then, Jesus gives the world permission to judge whether one is a follower of Jesus simply on the basis of their love for each other. Now that is a poignant reality.

The early believers fulfilled this command; they loved one another. A writer named Caecilius (ca. AD 210) said of the Christians, "They know one another by secret marks and signs, and they love one another almost before they know one another." The Greek writer, Lucian (ca. AD 120-200) said of the early church, "It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator [Jesus] has put it into their heads that they are all brethren." The church father, Tertullian, said, "It is our care for the helpless, our practice of

lovingkindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. 'Look,' they say, 'How they love one another! Look how they are prepared to die for one another!'"

Would outsiders describe modern Christians like that? Are believers today fulfilling the command of Jesus to love one another? If people judged your Christian life, and they are, on the basis of your love for brothers and sister in Christ would you pass the test? Don't you think it breaks God's heart and hurts God's name when Christians can't get along?

The absence of love in the life of a believer is inconsistent with the message of love that has been commanded by Jesus. Christian love is foundational to being a child of God. In fact,

III. Believers' love provides an assurance of salvation.

John continued, "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him" (1 John 3:14-15 NIV). With John no pastels, no shades of gray, are present in his description of people in their relationship with God. The only two classifications are the spiritually alive or the spiritually dead, the child of God or the child of the devil, the believer or the unbeliever. Everyone belongs to one or the other. One of the evidences that one is a believer is their love for the family.

Let me be clear, becoming a Christian is not earned by loving the family. Rather, loving the family is proof that one has made the transition from death to life, from a child of the devil to a child of God. Love for the family is, therefore, an avenue of assurance of salvation not the means for obtaining salvation.

If you are questioning your salvation, check your love quotient. If you don't love your brother, then check your salvation? Loving others - especially when they are unloving and don't deserve it - is a sign that you are part of God's family.

But how do I know what love is?

IV. Jesus' love is illustrated by his sacrifice.

Having shown that love for the family is evidence of being a Christian, John now sets forth the supreme example of this love: the sacrifice of Jesus. John said, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16 NIV). Laid down involves a deliberate, willful act that demonstrated his love for us. Love is a matter of the will rather than the emotion. D. E. Heibert wrote, "Since one's life is an individual's most precious possession, Christ's willingness to lay down that life on behalf of others constituted the greatest possible expression of love."

If you want a portrait of love, look to the life of Jesus. He illustrated love by the life he lived. He never showed hatred or malice. He only got angry over injustice, but that was motivated by his love for people. He went out of his way to help even those his fellow Jews despised. He crossed racial, cultural, and geographical barriers to care for people. He reached out to the unlovely and the castaways of the world. But the ultimate expression of his love was when he went to the cross, sacrificing his life for us. I for one didn't earn it or deserve it. It's as though Jesus were asked how much do you love humans, he stretched out his arms and said, "This much."

A picture is worth a thousand words. Look to Jesus and you will see the very embodiment, the personification of love.

Does that mean that I must make the ultimate sacrifice to show my love for the family? Maybe, but most often,

V. Christian love is expressed by actions, personal and practical.

Let's face it, most of will not be called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice, but we can make small sacrifices of love each day. I heard of a man who came to God and said, "I want to give you a \$10,000." And God said, "Instead of giving me \$10,000 I want you to give each day \$1 and \$2 and \$5 gifts to people in need."

I think that is what John had in mind here as he penned these words. "And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:16-18 NIV). Real Christian love is expressed in the daily acts of service and help that may not equal much but when you add it altogether it equates to a lot.

John informed us that Christian love is personal. John does an interesting thing in these verses. He speaks of brothers, plural, in verse 16, but makes a deliberate and significant change in verse 17 when he speaks of brother, singular. He knew then what we often say today: It is easier to love mankind than it is love that man that lives with me. It is easier to love the world than my neighbors. It is easier to love the church than to love the person sitting across the aisle. G. P. Lewis wrote, "It is easier to be enthusiastic about Humanity with a capital 'H' than it is to love individual men and women, especially those who are uninteresting, exasperating, depraved, or otherwise unattractive. Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular."

Let's face it some people are hard to love. You thought you were marrying Snow White only to discover that it was the Wicked Witch or you thought you were marrying Prince Charming but woke up next to Grumpy. Then there are people at church you can't stand. You would rather hug a porcupine. Maybe you can identify with the rivalry between Winston Churchill and Lady Astor. One day Lady Astor said, "If I were your wife I'd put arsenic in your beer." Churchill replied, "If you were my wife, I'd drink it." On another occasion, Lady Astor glared at Prime Minister Churchill, "Sir, you are quite drunk." Churchill replied, "Madam, I may be quite drunk. However, you are quite ugly. And I will be sober in the morning."

We all have people in our lives that we don't like. What do we do? We love them anyway. If we have the ability and see a need we meet it. We forgive them when they hurt us. We do good to them. We bless them. We pray for them. We help them.

John went on to say that Christian love is practical. Christian love always expresses itself in action. John contrasts words versus actions. To love in word means simply to talk about a need, but to love in action means to do something about meeting that need. Christian love doesn't just say, "I love you," it gets its hands dirty, its feet dusty, and its heart engaged.

As I was working on this message an email came across regarding a family in our church in which one of the parents recently had surgery, and the writer of the email was asking members to practically help and serve the needs of this family.

We come back to our definition: Love is a self-sacrificing, caring commitment that shows itself in seeking the highest good of others. Love acts.

The brutal truth about loving the family is that it boils down to obeying a command of Jesus by displaying actions of self-sacrifice to others. Loving the family is an evidence of our salvation. If people are judging our Christian faith on the basis of our love for one another, are we passing the test? Do we show the sign, the mark of a Christian, of loving the family?

I'm here today, standing as preacher, because of the love of a church. I was a quite, timid, fearful little boy, but a church family loved me. They told me about Jesus. They taught me the Bible. They gave me opportunity to serve. They even recognized the call of God upon my life - and licensed me to the ministry. They saw something in me that I did not see in myself. They loved me.

And here's the thing, I don't ever remember the church having a fight, or people getting their feelings hurt and leaving, or a group leaving to start another church because they didn't get their way. I know they were not perfect, but they worked through their problems. They loved one another. They loved me.

What will people say about this church? Will they say: They love one another?