

WALKING IN THE LIGHT- First John and the Path to Living Deeply in Christ - Part thirteen

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HOW TO KNOW YOU HAVE PASSED OUT OF DEATH INTO LIFE

1 John 3:11-18 - "For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. [12] 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. [13] Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. [14] We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. [15] Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. [16] By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. [17] But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? [18] Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."

John takes the remainder of this entire third chapter to unpack the implications of the opening verse: "**See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him**" (1 John 3:1).

Our text today grows out of that theme text and John forces me to think it all through. Today's text is the obvious ***deduction***, the logical ***fruit*** of that great first verse. If God is my Father then I'm His child. And if God's ***your*** Father, ***you're*** His child. So far so good, but it goes one step further. If ***I'm*** God's child and if ***you're*** God's child, we're ***related***. In other words, I didn't just get a relationship ***with God*** when I made Jesus Christ my Lord. I entered an unbreakable relationship ***with you***.

John means for us to think very deeply about this. So immediately after telling us of the wonder working power of God's sacrificial love for us John tells the story of two ***brothers***.

1) A TALE OF TWO FAMOUS BROTHERS AND ITS LESSON

1 John 3:11-12 - "For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. [12] 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."

Now you have to ask a question as you read those verses. Does John actually have this secret fear that the body of Christ is full of people who are plotting to murder the person sitting behind

them in church? "***Do not be like Cain, the murderer!***" I would never kill any of you even if I had the chance. And, perhaps with a few exceptions, I'm pretty sure you would never kill me either.

At worst, I might get quite bitter with you and quietly rage against you on the inside. And John would say, "There it is. Right there. That's just like Cain!" "No it isn't." "Yes it is." "No it isn't." "Yes it is." It ***is*** just like Cain if we remember John is describing **God's** view of my hateful heart. John is crying out for my attention to the fact that God is just as grieved and I am just as guilty in His eyes when I ***hate*** my brother as Cain was guilty when he ***killed*** his brother.

And could it also be true that just as much damage is done to my soul when I ***hate*** as when I ***kill?*** Could it be that I'm good at seeing the wickedness of Cain's sin but almost blind to my own? Do I lose the ability to see and define sin as clearly when it's in ***my own*** mind and heart? All of this is in John's mind as the Holy Spirit inspires his writing.

2) **EVERY ATTITUDE OF ANIMOSITY AND BITTERNESS IS A MANIFESTATION OF THE DEVIL'S RULE IN MY HEART**

Of course, I'd prefer to think of my rankled spirit as nothing more than my concern for justice and proper doings, especially in the church. And it seems John ***knows*** how my heart schemes for its own self-defense. He addresses my blind-spot very specifically by telling me the state of my sour heart doesn't reveal anything at all about my ***brother's*** heart. Only ***mine:***

1 John 3:12 - "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."

John seems intent on pressing that "***why***" question - "***....and why did he murder him....?***" Hatred only shows the state of ***my*** heart. And it's not just a matter of ***temperament*** or ***my desire for divine justice***. John says it's the devil.

That's why John is so blunt in the way he likens bitterness and ill-will to murder. Everyone knows murder is never justified. So it is, says John, with bitterness and ill-will. Never re-label ***rage and resentment and bitterness*** as a hunger for ***righteous justice***.

Let me risk offending you by making this point as strongly as I can with a very rough example. Imagine coming home from an evening out. You've left your 15 and 4 year old sons home alone. As you come into the living room you see the older son, with the poker from the fireplace in his hand, beating the now lifeless body of the younger. Blood is all over the couch and carpet. In horror you scream out, "What in the world are you doing?" And then you discover the elder has no grief or remorse in his voice whatsoever. Only hatred and anger spew forth as he says, "He had it coming. He came in while I was watching TV and switched the channels without asking."

Can you imagine any parent saying, "O! I didn't realize that. I guess he had it coming, the little rat." No. All of us would say, "It doesn't matter what **he** did. **Nothing** he did justifies what **you** did. That's insane!"

And that's the point John is making here. We **all** tend to find very holy explanations for the vengeful attitudes and dark feelings in our own hearts. Satan's rule extends in my darkened heart to the extent I don't tell myself the truth about my attitude.

Jesus isn't Lord until a hateful attitude has been replaced by loving actions. And we **know** what love looks like from the teaching of the Scriptures:

1 Peter 4:7-8 - "The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. [8] Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins."

Proverbs 10:12 - "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses."

When Peter talks about the end of the age he has almost no interest whatsoever in pinpointing the timing of the rapture or the state of the middle east. When Peter thinks of the end of the age he **tells** us what he wants us to be concentrating on more than anything else. "**Above all**" we're to focus on how we love each other.

And the way we're to be doing it is summed up in one word - "**earnestly.**" I take that to mean we're to make sure **love** doesn't become **talk**. Or, we're to make sure **love** doesn't ferment into **bitterness**. We're to make sure, says Peter, we "**keep on loving each other.**"

Whom have you quit loving recently? "No one, Pastor Don. I'm a Christian and I love everyone." How do you **know** you love everyone? What does **continuing love** look like? Again Peter tells us. It does something with the sins other people commit against us. It "**covers them**" - "**Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins**"(1 Peter 4:8).

"Well, if we do that, Pastor Don, we'll be going soft on holiness and purity."

No. No we won't. Because I'm not to cover up **my own** sins. And there Scriptural patterns set up in the church to deal with certain kinds of sins that require church discipline. "Well what about when that doesn't happen that way I think it should? What about people who get away with their sins?"

And who would that be? Who won't stand before the throne of God and give an account of each and every deed done in the flesh? All sins that don't receive proper retribution in this fallen world and in this imperfect church get their due on judgement day. No sinner gets away free with unrepented sin. Not ever.

The real question is quite different in Peter and John's perspective. The real question is **why am I so anxious to see my brother punished?** John says I'm to love the one who has wronged me like a brother. Peter tells me what that love looks like. Its number one concern is to **cover** my persecutor's guilt. The last thing I want is to have it exposed.

We all know only the blood of Jesus can cleanse anybody from her or his sin. But that's not what Peter is writing about. He's not writing a theology about the divine forgiveness of sin. He's writing about the **theology of the manifestation of love in my heart toward the one who has wronged me**. He's writing about my response to the sins that people commit against me in the church.

And what Peter says is real love **covers** those things up. It bears with the wrongs of others. It will suffer the pain others inflict without striking back or holding a grudge. And Peter got this from both the example **and** the teaching of Jesus. He must have been shocked when Jesus pressed the issue of personal retaliation beyond just **professing forgiveness** to our persecutors. Jesus knew we would all **say** we forgive our enemies.

That's why Jesus tested our words with our willingness to **bless** those who persecuted us - **Luke 6:27-28** - "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, [28] bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

We would **pray** for God's best for them. We would **tell** them we would love to be a blessing to them, if they would just tell us how. We would **make time** to bless them with fellowship and sharing and warmth.

This all gets so practical in a church setting like ours. If you're new here, let me tell you something about this church. People will do things to you that you don't like in this church. This church will do things you don't like. Decisions will be made that you won't agree with. People will say things that can be unkind and thoughtless. Many times people can do harm without even intending it. And the most painful times of all will come to you - times when you know full well somebody labored with wicked energy and scheming to make your life miserable.

Peter and John are talking about what plan of action you have when these things happen. How are you going to choose to respond? Peter says when everything hits the fan - when tempers flare - when in the most literal sense all hell breaks loose in the church - there is going to be a terrible mess unless mature Christians remember that - "**The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. [8] Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins....**" (1 Peter 4: 7-8)

And John's point in our text is the Lordship of Jesus means absolutely **nothing** in my life if I don't rise above the pattern of Cain with my brother or sister in Christ Jesus.

3) **JESUS CHRIST IS MY PATTERN FOR LOVING AND FORGIVING OTHERS WHO HAVE WRONGED ME**

1 John 3:16 - "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers."

Jesus is more than just a **teacher** to be listened to. He's a **Lord** to be obeyed and He's a **pattern**

to be copied. The emphasis is on ***doing*** what Jesus ***did***. And what the example of Jesus verifies is it always costs something to love and forgive those who have wronged you. When God forgives me it means I ***don't get the punishment I justly deserve from God***. It means God Himself suffers the punishment from the actions for my wickedness specifically so I don't have to. He ***covers*** my sins, quite literally, with the blood of Jesus. That's the blood of God the Son.

Personal, patient forbearing is the only way to cover the sins committed against you. That's how ***all*** deep forgiveness works. That's the only way ***we*** can be forgiven by God. We can't qualify for it. For God to forgive me it means ***He*** suffers when it's all ***my*** fault. That's exactly what David means when he says against God only do any of us sin.

That is always the way forgiveness and love work, whether divine or human. If I'm not willing to graciously bear the deliberate wrongs of others, even in the church, then I never will be a forgiving person. John says we love by ***giving up all personal rights***. Peter says this must be practiced "***above all***" in the Body of Christ. Paul says it's the nature of love to "**bear all things**" and to "**endure all things**."

Go anywhere you want in the New Testament and you'll never escape the same message.

4) **THE EMPHASIS IS SO STRONG BECAUSE BITTERNESS IS THE HARDEST SIN TO HAVE CLEANSED OUT OF OUR HEARTS**

1 John 3:12, 14-15 - "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*....[14] We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. *Whoever does not love abides in death.* [15] Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him."

Underline those words "**who was of the evil one**"(12) and "**whoever does not love abides in death**"(14). These sins, more than any others, cement the soul into death and ruin. It's hard for us to let go of them. You can preach about tithing and have people repent and tithe. You can preach about immorality and have people repent and come clean. You can preach about worship and have people begin in fresh ways to open up to God. But preach on bitterness and the person who is bitter will usually ***argue in his soul*** and ***hate the one who preaches about it***.

It happens that way almost all the time.

That's why there's always a special urgency in the New Testament to deal ***immediately*** with these sins for the sake of the soul:

Hebrews 12:14-15 - “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. [15] See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled”

Ephesians 4:31 - “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.”

Have you gotten rid of all of those things in your heart? Notice that all of those things have to do with relationships with others in the church. You may not be clean in ***everything*** but watch out for ***these*** sins in ***particular***.

We need a ***revival of patience*** in the body of Christ. Christians are becoming increasingly ***short-tempered*** with brothers and sisters in the Lord. Everyone is so proud to be an activist. We're so quick to insist on ***stating our case*** - on ***seeing justice done*** - on letting others know when we're not pleased. Almost any protest promotes that feeling of righteousness.

We are desperately in need of a return of the ***sweetness*** of Jesus as well as the ***holiness*** of Jesus in His church. The Holy Spirit needs to come again and make us less abrupt, more meek and easily entreated. A gentler Body of Christ needs to emerge before the watching world.

5) **LOVE IS THE DISTINCTIVE SIGN OF JESUS IN THE HEART**

There are ***three issues*** tied to this matter of loving the one who has wronged you:

A) "WE KNOW WE HAVE PASSED OUT OF DEATH INTO LIFE"

1 John 3:14 - “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.”

"We know we have passed out of death into life" - The subject here is **assurance** - silencing the stabs of a questioning heart - sensing the presence of Father God when we draw near.

John says all of these are directly tied to that one person with whom I'm bitter in the Body of Christ.

B) "BY THIS ALL PEOPLE WILL KNOW THAT YOU ARE MY DISCIPLES..."

John 13:34-35 - "**A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.** [35] **By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.**"

"**By this all people will know that you are my disciples...**" - We move from **personal assurance** to the **witness of the church in the world**. What makes **outsiders** look and say, "Wow, you just can't deny the reality of God in that place!"?

It isn't **doctrine**. What we believe is very important. John has already talked about how important it is for the church to look at the teaching it receives and make sure it is in order. The church must look at doctrine. But most outsiders aren't that interested.

What about **holiness**? Holiness is vitally important. The writer of Hebrews tells us without holiness nobody will see the Lord. John has already warned about making sure our words and our lives say the same thing.

But what does Jesus say **the world** uses for its measuring stick of His presence and power in our midst? It's **our love**. Even if everything else is in place, if there's bitterness, anger, and hatred, the world will never be drawn to Jesus. Everything else the church does is wasted.

Finally, there's a third issue tied to loving my brother:

C) "SO THAT THE WORLD MAY KNOW THAT YOU SENT ME"

John 17:20-21,23 - “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, [21] that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me....[23] I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”

This is different again from the other two passages. The first relates to **assurance**. The second gives **the world** the right to evaluate my conversion on the basis of my love for my brother.

This passage goes even further. The world will not only form an opinion about **me** by my forgiving love for my brother. It will form its opinion about **Jesus** by it as well.

We need to hear Jesus speak these words freshly at least every week - ***"Don, this world will receive me or reject Me on the basis of the love they see in you for the brother who wrongs you. And Don, you can undo all that was accomplished on the cross by your grievance with your brother!"***

Until the world sees the love of Jesus - the same **kind** of love Jesus had for me - until the world sees **that** kind of love, not just preached and declared and filmed and admired, but **practiced** with those who wrong and reject me - until the world sees **that**, Jesus said it will not listen to my **words** about Him.

Here's something I rarely think deeply about: What exactly does God do with all the sins committed against Him by Christian people all around the world every day? What does He do with all the impure thoughts, the greed, the anger, the broken relationships, the pride, the materialism, the lazy indifference, the stubbornness? Where does all that sin go?

I know Jesus died to provide complete forgiveness and that forgiveness extends to this very day. But of all the evil things done by the church right now, none of them can ever be undone or taken back. After God says "**I forgive you,**" what happens to all the pain in His heart caused by all of us who sin against Him, knowing better all the while?

I'll tell you what God does with all the sorrow for my sin. He **bears** it. He **endures** it. He **bears with the cost of my redemption** every single day. He's merciful every day. He pardons every day. He puts up with more than you and I will ever suffer in a million lifetimes. And He does this for us day after day after day.

That is why He **has the right** to call us to do the same.