

# JEALOUSY AND GENEROSITY

by Steve Zeisler

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I first came to live in the Bay Area at a historic time, September, 1967. The Summer of Love was in full flower. The Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco was known around the world for its hippie culture. There were slogans, such as "Make love not war" and "Everybody get together and love one another right now." There were love-ins and free love, and everyone wore a flower in their hair. Love was discussed and promoted everywhere. Some claimed that a new age had dawned.

But tragically, the failure to actually love anyone also was characteristic of that era. Many lives were ruined by drugs and shallow sexual relationships. Nothing new had been born. As in every other time and place, human beings longed for love and failed to achieve it.

"What the world needs now is love, sweet love  
It's the only thing that there's just too little of"

First John 3:11 puts it this way: "This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another." In using the phrase "the beginning" here, John is most likely talking about the early part of one's Christian life. Jesus' command to love is basic to Christian discipleship.

But John may be thinking of the beginning in another way, as well. He goes back to the beginning of the human race in the very next verse. It is not only Christians who believe that we should love one another. In every place, wherever families exist, wherever parents care at all about raising their children, they will say to their children, "Love your brother. Love your sister. Love one another." It's a command that goes back to the first human family. And yet the failure to love also goes back just as far. We never succeed on our own in carrying out that calling which is from the beginning, that we should love one another.

The end of our passage, verse 18, gives the very practical word: "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth." This challenge helps us understand why there is so much failure to love when everybody believes in it.<sup>1</sup> There is always more discussion of love and much more appreciation of it from a distance than real active sacrifice for another.

Let's read 1 John 3:11-18:

This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. 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. Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. 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.

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. 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.

There is a simple way to summarize what John wants to say here. In verse 12 he says, "Do not be like Cain." In verse 16 he says essentially, "Be like Jesus." Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to do the same.

**Do not be like Cain**

It's important to take the step of rejecting the life of Cain. John's direct discussion of hatred and murder is a little disconcerting. But he is teaching us to love, and until we learn to reject being like Cain, we will never learn to love.

1 John 2:7 says that love is ancient: "Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard...Whoever loves his brother lives in the light...." Adam and Eve's children were at the beginning, the first set of brothers to whom the command was directed: "Love your brother." We should imagine that Cain and Abel were very similar. In Genesis 4 we find the story of their birth and growing up, and then the eventful day that led to Abel's death. These brothers were raised by the same loving parents and taught the same values. They grew up in the same environment and were equally well cared for by their parents. They most likely resembled each other physically and were probably close in age. They went together to worship God and bring offerings to him. Everything about them was similar-but they were dramatically different on the inside.

The story in Genesis 4 is short and maddeningly lacking in details. What we are told is that as these two brothers came to worship God, each of them brought an offering. One was accepted by God, and one was rejected. We aren't told what it was about Abel that led God to approve of him, or what it was about Cain that led God to tell him his actions were disobedient, unrighteous, and unacceptable. We should note that God never makes a statement comparing them to each other. As we're going to see in a moment, it was Cain who did the comparing in his anger. God dealt with Abel as an individual, then turned to Cain and dealt with him as an individual.

Some scholars argue that the difference between them was that Abel's was a blood offering involving a death, and Cain's wasn't. That may be the reason, but the Bible doesn't say that. We know that the Jews offered grain offerings later in their history. The notion that a grain offering (or an offering of something else that grew in the ground) should always be rejected is not consistent with what we know of the law.

There was something on the inside that the Lord saw and that distinguished the two brothers. That is why God said to Cain, not comparing him to his brother but speaking to him of his own heart: "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door...." God's word to him was, "It can be turned around, Cain. Restoration is possible. The problems you have on the inside, the rebellion that has led to your making an offering unacceptable to me, can be reversed. Relationship can be restored, things can be put right. But you have some very important choices to make."

God spoke directly to Cain, but Cain didn't listen. He murdered his brother. Both the Old Testament Hebrew word and the New Testament Greek word for murder here mean slaughter. It is a violent, terrible death that our text refers to. So John's word to us is very significant: "Do not to be like Cain."

### **What is in your heart?**

What information do we have in these verses that helps us obey in this? First, in verse 15 an important point is made: "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him." This is the same truth Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. If you harbor hatred for someone in your heart, if you have a root of bitterness toward someone, if there is unreconciled resentment, and you refuse God's help to overcome it, then you are a murderer. Even if you're not physically violent you can still be like Cain.

Further, in verse 12, we read that Cain belonged to the evil one. Human history doesn't really make sense, and the Bible certainly doesn't make sense, unless we recognize that there is a cunning, malevolent spiritual personality that exists to oppose the heart of God. He is a created being, and God has allowed his influence only for a time, but in interaction with human beings like us, he knows our weaknesses and preys upon them. Cain, we are told, had chosen to listen to the rival of God rather than God to make sense of life.

We talked about antichrists in the last message. The final antichrist is the human representation of this spiritual person-the evil one. Cain was taken in by "the schemes of the devil," believing his lies rather than God's truth.

We are like Cain when we listen to the evil one, rather than listening to the Lord God.

Also, we are told that Cain's deeds were evil—he belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. Why did he murder him? Because his actions were evil, and his brother's were righteous. When Cain came to God with his offering, he was exposed for what he was. He was someone who had chosen, in ways we are not told, to disobey. He was a rebel.

So we are not to be like Cain in reacting defensively when we are exposed for what we are. Every one of us hates to be shown at our worst, to be discovered. I know it so well of myself, and I've lived long enough to believe it's true of everyone. There are things about every one of us that we are ashamed of, that we want to hide from ourselves and pretend are not there. We instinctively avoid the awful experience of being exposed.

One of the most attractive phrases I find in the Bible is the description of the way the first man and woman related to each other before they fell into sin: They were naked and not ashamed. Imagine what it would be like to have someone know you completely; to be open emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually with them—and to be completely unashamed to be discovered as you are. That is so attractive, and its loss is so agonizing. Cain hated to be exposed.

### **God never compares us to others**

The last point about what it means to be like Cain is his jealousy of his brother. That may be the most important point in John's argument. It wasn't just that Cain's own heart was wrong. The thing that was galling to him was that God approved of Abel and the choices he made. That was a source of fury for Cain.

Again, in the Genesis account, the Lord doesn't say to Cain, "Be more like your brother." God never compares us to anyone else. We can't find examples in Scripture where the Lord says, "I disapprove of you because you're not more like somebody else." All of us relate to God as individuals. We have individually been given opportunities and gifts by him. We are to individually repent of our sins to him, be restored by him, be raised up by him, or be set aside by him.

Therefore, we are not in competition with each other. Grace is not like a zero-sum game in which one player's gain means the other player's loss. The fact that somebody else has been treated graciously by God doesn't mean he is less likely to treat us graciously. He doesn't use up his love for us by giving it to someone else. We can rejoice when a brother or sister rejoices because they are experiencing God's love. We can love them fully and not insist that we have what they have, because we're relating to a Father who loves us fully as well. He'll do good to us, he has a purpose for us, he understands what we need. We always have his full attention. The idea that spiritual or emotional rivalry with the people around us makes sense; that jealousy, revenge, and clamoring for what has been given another is in any degree reasonable; is a completely unbiblical point of view.

Cain's issues were all internal issues. He believed God's rival rather than God. He covered up his own unrighteousness and hated to have it exposed. He resented his brother, jealous of one who had been given an opportunity that he himself was offered but refused. And we must not be like him. That is the first step in learning to love: We have to solve the heart problems. We have to decide that God is worthy of our trust, and not listen to the liar. We have to confess our sins rather than hide them, to agree with God that what he says is wrong about us is wrong and turn from it, be forgiven of it, and be made new. And we have to refuse to measure ourselves competitively against one another, but rejoice and be thrilled when a brother or sister near us is given a gift, knowing that God's gifts to us have not been in any way diminished.

John goes on to say in verse 13 that we should not be surprised if the world hates us, because Cains are everywhere. We are all very familiar with Cain. We know what it's like to live as he lived. Before the Lord changed us, every one of us was like Cain.

Verse 14 suggests that if anything, what we should be surprised at and should glory in is the discovery of love. We have passed from death to life if we have discovered in ourselves an ability to love that doesn't come from us. It is a glorious thing to learn to love someone we were once unable to love, to take risks for love that

we were too inhibited to take before, to forgive the family member who treated us badly, to reach across the chasm of a painful marriage and care about someone we've been hurt by and whom we've hurt, and to discover that God's love cuts through layers of antipathy that have built up over years. That is John's point here. Love helps us recognize that life has been given to us.

## **Be like Jesus**

If we're not to be like Cain, we are to be like Jesus. Let's move on from murder to the wonderful news that begins in verse 16. What is the alternative? "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." 2 Jesus defined what real love is. It is sacrificial and difficult. It is to spend yourself for somebody else. We know love by his example, and we know love because we have experienced his love. He laid down his life not just for mankind in general, but for us personally. We know what it's like to have his death applied to our sin, to have his mercy poured out for us.

Jesus spent himself for us, so we ought to spend ourselves for each other. This is not a contractual argument John is making. He is not saying, "Jesus did a lot for you, and now you owe him. So make up what you owe by paying the debt. You ought to love others in the same way that you ought to pay your bills." That's not the idea.

John's argument is that nothing other than love makes sense. The one who is forgiven little loves little, Jesus said, and he taught by implication the opposite point (see Luke 7:47): The one who has been forgiven much loves much. Our experience of Jesus' love for us makes it impossible to choose to do anything else. Nothing else occurs to us. If we allow the love of Christ to touch us deeply, of course we ought to love each other-expend ourselves, lay down our lives, give up our rights, prefer another instead of ourselves, raise up another instead of taking the limelight for ourselves, give away our possessions, go where there is hurt. He laid down his life for us, and we ought to do the same.

C.S. Lewis made a telling comment on this point: "It is easier to be enthusiastic about Humanity 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."

Verse 17: "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?" There are a number of phrases here that I want to comment on briefly. First, one implication that flows from having material possessions is that your possessions don't have you-you do in fact have them. You have not been overtaken by what you own, so that you are serving your things, securing and defending them. If that's true, you can't give them away because you have no freedom to do anything with them-they own you. But John speaks of people who are at least mature enough to be in charge of their possessions, to be a steward of what they have been given.

'If you see your brother in need', that suggests that your eyes are open. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite went by the man beaten and lying by the side of the road. They didn't want to see him. They glanced at him, avoided his gaze, and moved away from seeing the pain as quickly as they could. Seeing your brother in need means you are willing to be aware, rather than fill your life with pamperings and diversions.

My parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary is this year. They just returned from a cruise they took in honor of fifty years of wedded bliss. It was the first time they had ever been on a cruise, and they had a marvelous time. Apparently, all the passengers were asked at one point to tell stories of their previous experiences on similar trips. My parents were among the few rookies on the boat. One of the other passengers was on her ninety-sixth cruise! Again, to John's point, we don't see too much need if we fill our lives endlessly with diversions. But having this world's goods and seeing your brother in need, how can the love of God live in you if you don't respond in concern and do something about it? It can't be.

## **A commitment to sacrificial love**

Lastly, verse 18 which we've already mentioned: "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with

actions and in truth." Anybody can talk about how important love is. It was the hallmark of the Summer of Love in San Francisco, with the songs, the posters, the slogans, and the short-lived emotions of the time. What wasn't there was a commitment to truthfully act in sacrificial love for someone. Truth is a very important modifier here. John is not telling us to enter into a co-dependent relationship in which we are feeding someone else's problem with our sacrifice. That doesn't do any good. But in action and in truth to give ourselves away, to live sacrificially, to lay down our lives the way Jesus did, to be free of materialism so that we can give to those in need, is the only thing that makes sense if we have apprehended the love of Christ for us.

I'd like to close with lyrics from the song *Take my Life and Let it Be*:

Take my life and let it be  
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee...  
Take my hands and let them move  
At the impulse of Thy love...  
Take my voice and let me sing  
Always, only, for my King...  
Take my silver and my gold-  
Not a mite would I withhold...  
Take my will and make it Thine-  
It shall be no longer mine...  
Take my love---my Lord, I pour  
At Thy feet its treasure store;  
Take myself---and I will be  
Ever, only, all for Thee,  
Ever, only, all for Thee.

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Catalog No. 4437  
1 John 3:11-18  
Seventh Message  
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June 4, 1995

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