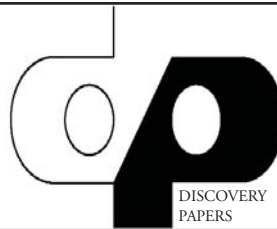


# THE CHALLENGE OF LOVE

*SERIES: IN HIM IS NO DARKNESS AT ALL*



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1 John 3:13-4:6  
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Cain was the first human being to enter the world in the normal way: conceived, birthed, and raised by parents. He also was a remorseless murderer. He defied God, embraced violence, and ended his days cursed and cast away. Cain's story is told in Genesis 4 and stands as a warning to instruct us about the kind of people we are capable of being. The apostle John in his letter 1 John, which we are studying together, refers to the death of Abel at the hand of his brother Cain in 3:12: "Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother."

As we have noted, this letter calls us away from squeaky wheels, the demands of the moment, and raises our gaze to the important things, to big issues, to stark contrasts. These include the contrasts between love and hatred, truth and lies, darkness and light, the children of God and the children of the devil. In the text before us now, we will consider the contrast between death and life.

## Death and Life

First John 3:13-14a:

**Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life....**

We observe first that there is no middle ground. Everyone begins human existence as a captive of death, and we either pass from death to life or we remain in death. Those are the only two categories. The world reacts to the gospel and the people of God with hatred and resistance, because there is no category for self-made heroes. We either remain in death or we pass from death to life as a gift from God.

Verses 14-15:

**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.**

John's main point is that love identifies those who have life. If we love our brothers we know that we have passed from death to life.

But he also makes some important observations about the nature of life and death. Consider the phrase "remains in death." In the story of Cain and Abel, Abel

was the one whose blood was poured out on the ground. But he was not the one who remained in death.

For Abel, drawing his last breath was a doorway opened into the presence of God, into greater life, as it is for all who believe. The end of this life is not something we need to fear. The one who remains in death, as John is arguing here, is the murderer. He is the one who is still in captivity as the slave of death. He is the one who is still infected by the disease of death. He is the one who is still doing the bidding of the evil one who is the shepherd of death. The tragic figure is not Abel but Cain.

We know we have moved from death to life when we love one another. Of course this contradicts the world's passion for wealth, security, prominence, and pleasure as measures of those who are "really living."

So death is a surprising thing. Who remains in death? The murderer remains in death. And life is a surprising thing. What is evidence of life? Giving yourself away, pouring yourself out for someone else, loving your brother.

## Authentic Love

Verses 16-18:

**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.**

A beautiful paradox unfolds here. Love is the evidence that we have passed into life. Laying down our lives, as Jesus did, is the essence of love. The one who gives up his life saves it. Cain's self-protective aggression cost him everything.

Dying to ourselves has practical application. "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?" The first phrase, "if anyone has material possessions," poses a question: do we have material possessions? We need humility before God, a willingness to hear him in answering that question. We need help from one another.

People who have more often find it harder to be generous than the poor do. Some folks are financially irresponsible and claim to be acting in faith. Some define their "needs" at an enormously high level. Knowing what I am responsible

to plan for, what is wise, when I am overly self-protective, when I am selfish, and when I should challenge convention—all these are difficult to decide. God owns “my possessions” and I am his steward.

First John 3:17 makes clear that the needs of my brother are a paramount consideration in faithful stewardship. It is too easy to avoid “seeing a brother in need.” We can insulate ourselves from the poor or find excuses to refuse a generous response. John’s question doesn’t go away, however: “How can the love of God be in him?”

Surely the economic distress of the last year presents us with opportunities for love. Some will unexpectedly be put in the emotionally painful position of asking for help. Some will find new ways to share more when they have less. Economic hardship and opportunities for expressing love go together.

Verse 18 deserves our attention as well. “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” Again, John is identifying a pattern that is easy to fall into: talking about things without doing them.

Our faith is rooted in language—written Scriptures and a preached gospel. We gather in communities that include spoken prayers and burdens shared. Yet often our talking descends into unworthy complaints or gossip. Even more often it becomes a substitute for love in action. And technology has expanded the opportunity of all of us to talk without doing anything, to transmit emails and compose blogs and send tweets and comment on commentary. Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue or text message or keyboard, but with actions and in truth.

Beginning in verse 19, John addresses a different concern. Choosing to love generously reassures us when we are faced with the hatred and condemnation of the world (verse 13). But sometimes the condemning word comes from inside. Verses 19-20:

**This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.**

I have never met an honest Christian who has not at some time experienced his or her own heart’s condemnation: “You are a failure, a phony, a hypocrite.” And we know that self-condemnation makes us turn away from the living water of God’s grace.

John has an answer that is profound and simple at the same time. He doesn’t suggest introspection or efforts to discover the nature and source of negative emotions. It is characteristic of our era to explore our subjective inner experiences, and good can come of this, but John’s instruction is to attend elsewhere. The word of the Father, filled with love and faithful to forgive, is greater than our hearts. God has the right to veto our interior messages and deny their condemnations. He is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

In verse 21, John begins consideration of the alternative to a condemning heart and a downward spiral of guilt reinforcing self-hatred. We read of “confidence before God”—a circle spiraling upward in which faith, obedience, and God’s gifts build on one another.

## Confidence Before God

Verses 21-24:

**Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live 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.**

Confidence leads to asking, obeying to receiving. Belief reinforces love. We live in him and he lives in us, and the more we live in him, the more he lives in us. As God gives one gift, he gives more gifts, and as something becomes good, it becomes better, and the Spirit grants us confidence amidst growing obedience, faith, and love.

We conclude this study with the opening verses of chapter 4. Once again we will encounter the challenge of false teachers—not the hatred of the world or inner condemnation, but teachers who twist the gospel message.

## Testing for Truth

First John 4:1-6:

**Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.**

**You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.**

There are always going to be false spirits, voices that claim authority from the spiritual realm. False prophets are often very effective, and John gives two tests to help his flock determine the validity of teachers. Verses 2-3: first, do they tell the truth about Jesus Christ? We should not be fooled by drama and displays of power. We must always turn from any voice that does not exalt the person of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit always will magnify the Son. The Holy Spirit will always lift up Christ. Those who are false prophets speaking for false spirits will not.

The second test is in verse 6: "Whoever knows God listens to us (the apostles)." The teaching of the apostles, or Scripture, is the means by which we judge whether someone is telling the truth or not. Those who submit to the Bible are telling the truth. We were reminded in 1 John 3:24 of the Spirit's presence with us. The Spirit of truth will protect us from the spirits of falsehood.

When I was new in the ministry, Bob Smith, one of the founders of PBC, was an elder and pastor here. Bob was a very direct guy. At one point I was discouraged and overwhelmed and asked Bob to help me sort out a lot of conflicting demands and negative feelings. Rather than engaging my stack of concerns, he said, almost as if he were a doctor writing a prescription, "You, dear son, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." Bob knew that I needed assurance of the Lord's presence and power more than I needed the answers to my questions. Whatever the opposition, whatever the heartache that the world brings our way, the one who resides in us is greater. And our way is forward. Our stand is strong. He is there. He is in us, he is for us, and he is greater.