WHAT LOVE IS…

1 John 3:11-18

Key Verse: 3:16

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“This is how we know that what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.”

From the last lesson, we thank God for Jesus who appeared to take away our sins and to destroy the devil’s work. In light of Jesus’ grace that took away our sins, may we come to him with our sins at each time and be renewed in this grace. And in Jesus’ victory over the devil, may we discern the devil’s work and join in this spiritual battle against the devil personally and as God’s people in this world. In 3:10 we read, “This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.” Children of God are to do what is right and love their brothers. The main topic of today’s passage is love, particularly, the true love, the love of Christ, who laid down his life for us. And God exhorts us his children to practice this love of Christ.

**First, we have passed from death to life (11-15).** Verse 11 says, “This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.” Until now John talked regarding love, saying in 2:9-10, “Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light” and in 3:10, “Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.” Here, John gives a clear exhortation: We should love one another. As we studied, the love command is an old command and also a new command. Jesus said in John 13:34, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” Love is the distinguishing mark of those who are born of God. In the early Christian era, many came to Christ seeing the loving community of Christians. “We should love one another”, this exhortation is a duty of God’s children and also it is a test for them.

So John says in verse 12, “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.” Amid many examples of love, why did John bring the story of Cain’s murdering his brother? We know that it is the first tragic event after Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden. It shows how sin grew and its power was exploded. The evil one worked powerfully through man’s sin. Cain murdered his brother because his own actions were evil, while his brother’s were righteous. Definitely his evil actions were out of his hatred toward the righteous God in his broken relationship with God, whereas Abel’s righteous acts were out of love for God in his right relationship with God. When we think of Genesis chapter 4, God rejected Cain and his offering, while he accepted Abel and his offering. This was a sovereign act of God. What God does is always right and good. God’s rejection of him and his offering could have been an opportunity for Cain to reflect on what he had done and find what was wrong with him and repent and turn to God. However, at this righteous and sovereign act of God, Cain was angry at God. In his own understanding, God was wrong and he was right. Such a view of God and himself showed that God was not in his heart but he himself was on the throne of his heart. To him, everything should revolve around him. His own view was the truth. Subsequently, in his self-centred view, his jealousy arose to the point of committing the homicide in his aforethought plan to kill his brother.

The spirit of Cain is the spirit of the world. So verse 13 says, “Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.” As we studied, the world hates God’s people, because it hates God. The world teaches that one’s self is most important and each one has his or her own truth, and you do not need the truth and God. This is a subtle, terrible lie. The world teaches that you should be happy today enjoying yourself, even if you die tomorrow. To further extent the voice of the world is that you should enjoy your life while you live in this world; don’t think of your life after death; this world is everything and there is no eternal life. But the truth of God is that our life in this world is temporal and the world and its desires pass away and our life is beyond this world to eternity whether receiving eternal life or eternal punishment. How we live in this world really matters, for it determines each one’s eternal destiny. Again, the world which is under the control of the evil one makes every effort to eliminate the truth of God and the concept of God himself out of this world. It hates Christian people because it hates Christ Jesus, whom God sent for the salvation of mankind to bring them back to God. That hatred become intense when the end of the world is coming closer, targeting the true people of Christ in all possible ways.

Then verse 14 says, “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers.” What a wonderful thing happened to Christians that they have passed from death to life! Christians are those who were dead in their transgressions and sins and are made alive in Christ Jesus who died for their sins and rose again from the dead. Jesus said 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.” This is truly the greatest change that can happen in one’s life. It is from condemnation to no condemnation; so from eternal death to eternal life. Jesus said in John 17:3, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” So the change from death to life is from not knowing God to knowing God. Apostle Paul said in Galatians 4:8-9 “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now you know God—or rather are known by God.” So one who is the realm of death does not know God. He cannot have fellowship with God. He is separated from God and his mind is hostile to God. Then a person who has passed from death to life knows God. He or she knows God personally, and their fellowship with God is most precious and important in this world. They love God and want to serve the will of God in this world, calling God Father, the eternal God. To know God and love God is everything. And Apostle Paul said in Romans 8:28, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

The change from death to life is the change of hope, from dead hope to living hope, from this world to the heavenly kingdom. Those who are dead have no hope, no true hope, for all things in this world perish. Apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 1:3, 4, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you.” As for those who have passed from death to life, their hope is changed from this world to the heavenly kingdom. Their citizenship is in heaven. According to Philippians 3:21, with this citizenship we early await a Saviour from heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. This glorious hope is in accordance with 1 John 3:2, “We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

Children of God have this hope and they are marching together toward the heavenly home. According to Ephesians 2:19, they are fellow citizens and the members of God’s household. They are pilgrims in this world, having the clear destination of their heavenly home as members of God’s household. They love one another as the same family members of God the Father, in the eternal family, while the world hates them. How precious they are to God the Father and to one another. They are to love one another, encourage one another and fight together against the evil in this world.

Then in verses 14b and 15 it says, “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.” Here John makes very clear regarding the lives of God’s children, born of God. Not loving is remaining in death, hatred is murdering, and murdering has no part with no eternal life. No love, hating, murdering, eternal death all belong to the evil one. We are to watch out for this.

**Second, Jesus Christ laid down his life for us (16-18).** Verse 16 says, “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.” One of the real tragedies of the age in which we live is that the great word “love” has become so debased and misused. To many loving means liking. It is important to know the distinction between loving and liking. Liking is something natural, something instinctive or elemental, something that is not the result of effort. It is physical and unintelligible. Liking is something that belongs to the animal part of life and nature. it is an interest in superficial things, appearance, colour, temperament, behaviour of certain mannerisms.

Many talk about love in the way books and articles or movies express it, which is generally infatuation or some intense form of liking. But we are to know that loving is quite different from liking. Love is never elemental or instinctive. Love is something that penetrates to the person; it goes beyond the superficial and the visible, the carnal and physical attraction, to something bigger and deeper. Loving is truly for others, while liking is for myself. Apostle Paul wrote love poem in 1 Corinthians 13: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs (13:4-5). These words of love description are all truly for the sake of others, which require denying myself.

Certainly, Paul’s love description is from God’s love. It is written in 1 John 4:8 and 16, “God is love.” So love talk must start from God, how he loved us, which is fully revealed in Christ Jesus. So John says in verse 16, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought lay down our lives for our brothers.” What a definition of love! We can sense that it is a perfect definition of love with just two short sentences. Its contents are Christ’s love and our love obligation.

Let’s think about Christ’s love. There was a military officer. Because of the mistake of one of his soldiers, a bomb whose safety device was opened was dropped on the ground and was about to explode, while there are many other solders in the unit. At that moment the officer threw his body on the bomb. With the explosion of the bomb the officer was killed on the spot, but the lives of all others were saved. If someone lays down his life for me, how great it is! Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 5:7-8, “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” The love of God and the of Christ are one. We can say that the love of God is the love of Christ and vice versa. Here in 1 John 3:16, “Jess Christ laid down his life for us.” Why did he do so? It is because we desperately needed such love. Without his such love, we would eternally perish.

Who is he? According to 1 John 1:1, “That which was from the beginning,’ he is from the beginning. He is the Son of God with all the heavenly glory and honour and power in perfect happiness and in eternity. There he saw the misery of mankind, who would eternally perish. Consequently, he gave up all his power and glory and honour in the heavenly kingdom and came down to this world. He lived the life of love being a servant of all only to be betrayed and finally killed on the cross. Yet, it was his will and willingness to live such a life and die such a death. This is the way he laid own his life. He said in John 10:18, “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.” He laid down his life in obedience to the will of God and of his own accord and for us. He chose to love us, because we desperately needed his love, only such a love. In his love he moved us from death to life. In the love of his death, every spiritual blessing came to us, as Apostle Paul said in Ephesians 1:3, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus.”

When we think of this love of Christ, who laid down his life for us, we are reminded of Song of songs 8:6-7, “…love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away.” We praise God for the love of Christ, his sacrificial love, unyielding, mighty and unquenchable.

Christ’s death is expressed in various ways in the Scriptures. The old prophet Isaiah said in Isaiah 53:5,7 “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities…and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” John wrote in 1 John 2:2, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins…” and in 4:10, “…he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” And 1 John 3:5 says, “…he appeared so that he might take away our sins…” meaning he became the lamb of God to be slain and the scapegoat to be sent into a desert, the land of the dead, being cut off from the living. Apostle Paul said in Romans 4:25, “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” Apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 2:24, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.” And again here John stated, “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.” Again his choice and determination is clearly demonstrated in his death by willingly laying down his life for us, which is uniquely expressed here in the Scriptures. And the connection is that we ought to lay own our lives for our brothers.

“And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” Wow! What a standard of love! This is God’s expectation and hope for us because of his love. Jesus said in John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” God wants such a perfect love from us his children in the hope of “we shall be like him.” In this hope of God, we see God’s deep concern for us that we may grasp the love of Christ by serving and loving our brothers in Christ. Yes, because of Christ’s love we can love our brothers and also by serving our brothers in love we can go deeper into the loving heart and mind of our Lord and Saviour Christ Jesus.

God wants us to serve and love others by following Christ’s example. So Paul said to the saints in Philippi in Philippians 2:5-8, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus/have the mindset of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” Christ’s love is related to his giving up and his humble life and obedient death. And Paul also said in Galatians 4:19, “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.” All these show how to lay down our lives for our brothers.

It is also good to always remember in serving and loving others what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 concerning love: “love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

Here is again a perfect description of what love is: “Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought lay down our lives for our brothers.” We believe that this is the spirit of Christianity, or the spirit of Christians, Christian husbands and wives, Christian parents and Christian children, Christian brothers and sisters.

Then in verse 17 John continues, “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?” What a contrast this description is to that of laying own one’s life for his brothers! It seems to be from the height of lying down our lives on Christ’s death on the cross to humdrum details. What is the point? God wants us to practice the great love obligation beginning with doing a small, yet concrete thing. This can be a spiritual secret. It is a beautiful thing to see one brother or sister in need and try to meet it taking pity on the person. It is not only with material things but also other needy things in other aspects of life.

When I think of Christian churches and young people in our time, what they need to hear most is the word of God. Amos 8:11-13 says, “‘The days are coming,’ declare the Sovereign LORD, ‘when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD. Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it. In that day the lovely young women and strong young men will faint because of thirst.” May I really prepare his words with life-giving spirit so that I can serve those who are in need of the word of God. Through UBF general director Pastor Moses Yoon’s message. we could think of the importance of serving one person with the message of the kingdom of God in our own limited situation. Truly serving one person with the word of God can be a good practice of the love of Christ.

Jesus said in Matthew 7:24-26, “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock…But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.” Paul also said in Philippians 3:9, “Whatever you learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice.”

Then in verse 18 John says, “Dear children, let us not love with words and tongue but with actions and in truth.” Needless to say, this action of love is for the sake of the person before God according to the words of God’s truth. It is to truly build up our brothers in Christ

We thank and prise God for Jesus Christ who laid down his life for us in his great compassion. In this grace may we also be able to lay down our lives for our bothers, beginning with doing small things through knowing their needs and having the heart of our Lord.