

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

February 3, 2019, Pastor Jeff Harrison

*Walking in the Light with Jesus*

**The Way of Love** (1 John 3:11 - 4:6)

### **Introduction:**

#### **A. False teachers tempt the church to abandon the essentials (4:1-6)**

I really enjoyed teaching Jacob how to play and sing that song ☺ Let's ask God for help as we come to His Word...

We're continuing our series on 1 John. So if you've got a Bible, turn to the New Testament book of 1 John, chapter 4. If you're new to reading the Bible, 1 John is towards the very end, and the big numbers you see are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers. This letter of 1 John was written by John, one of Jesus' 12 disciples and a very key church leader.

And one big reason why John writes 1 John is because he's really concerned about some false teachers who were causing some in the church to doubt. And the early church didn't have the whole New Testament yet, so at the beginning of chapter 4, John gives a simple guideline they can use to assess teaching. It says;

4 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. <sup>2</sup> 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, <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. <sup>6</sup> 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.

In these verses John says to the church, don't listen to anyone who denies that Jesus came in the flesh from God. No matter how popular this worldly viewpoint becomes, we continue to believe that Jesus came in the flesh to die for our sins and rise from the dead.

And if you read all of 1 John, you learn these false teachers were not only having some success undermining the church's confidence in the gospel message, they were also stirring up conflict. And this was causing the church to be in danger of losing their essential practice, love.

### **B. 1 John 3 guides us back to what really matters**

So in 1 John chapter 3, John guides the church back to what really matters, confidence in Jesus and living His way of love.

As in John's day, there are plenty of disagreements in our day, on social media, cable news, talk radio. And it's not just "out there", Christians also sometimes disagree in disagreeable ways. As I heard a pastor joke, "If the church expects to be the light of the world, then we should expect to attract a few bugs." And in conflict, sometimes we have the potential to be that annoying bug. As we take delight in pointing out someone's flaws or make a little comment that rubs it in when we're right or say "you always" or "you never." In the process, losing sight of what really matters, walking in the way of love.

### **I. The way of love has nothing to do with hate (3:11-15)**

So let's get some help from God's Word on this, starting in verse 11 of chapter 3:

<sup>11</sup> For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. <sup>14</sup> We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. <sup>15</sup> Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.

As verse 11 says, love is foundational, it's what we've heard from the beginning. Then starting in verse 12, John shows us what love is not, giving the example of Cain. There in the Old Testament book of Genesis chapter 4, Cain believes and worships God wrongly and then becomes jealous of his righteous brother Abel, murdering him in anger.

John here is connecting the false teachers with Cain. Like Cain, the false teachers believe wrongly and worship God wrongly, and they show their hatred as they stir up trouble in the church. So John is saying to the church, "Don't let these false teachers take away your confidence, they're Cain-like, believing and living wrongly."

And John wants to make sure the church not only rejects the false teachers' message, but their methods. Their misbehavior cannot justify misbehavior in the church, whether towards the false teachers or with each other as they respond to this stirred up conflict.

In disagreements, ungodly anger is a temptation for all of us. Whether it's someone with a different view on Jesus, or the church, or a doctrine you hold dear, or racial injustice, or abortion, or gun control, or same sex marriage, to small things like whose turn it is to do the dishes.

Of course there are real differences, some with eternal significance, so there's definitely a time and place to advocate for truth. But when our hold on truth includes hating people, we're utterly out of touch with God's ways, abiding in the spirit of death. Remember, we follow a Savior who was literally dying to love even those who put Him on the cross. So let at least the church be clear about this, we are to love everyone, and let us be a church that is dying to love each other.

## **II. The way of love lays down one's life for brothers and sisters (3:16-18)**

Not, metaphorically or literally, taking someone's life, like Cain; rather, giving our lives in love, like Jesus. As verse 16 says it:

<sup>16</sup>This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

This is the way of love, to lay down our lives, like Jesus, especially for our faith family. At the rest of verse 16 continues:

And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. <sup>17</sup> If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? <sup>18</sup> Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

How Christians treat each other is a big deal to God. One of my seminary professors, Dr. Horrell, went through the whole New Testament and found more commands about our relationships with each other in the church than about our behavior in the world or even our vertical responsibilities with God.<sup>1</sup>

It's because, as verse 16 says, we the church are brothers and sisters with each other, adopted into God's family together as children of our heavenly Father. Joseph Hellerman, a pastor at one of our sister Free Churches, coined the term "famlification" to describe the biblical

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Horrell, *From the Ground Up*, 80.

idea of our adoption into God's family. That when we believe in Jesus we experience not only justification, which is right standing before God, but also "famlification", adoption into His family.<sup>2</sup> So, as verse 17 says, if one of our brothers or sisters is in need, financially or otherwise, let's help in the ways we can.

Sometimes this is really hard, we might take on burdens we'd rather not be bothered with and our brother or sister might not appreciate our help, or even criticize us as we serve them. Other times, when we love, it's wonderful, it brings us closer to our brother or sister and we sense God's pleasure.

In the bad and good of loving each other, as we see Jesus laying down His life for us, may His Spirit stir us to lay down what is needed. Whether it's laying down some of our money, or time, or pride, to help a brother or sister in need. For this is a big part of walking in the light with Jesus.

Many of you are parents, and if you're not a parent, take my word for it. Parents love to see their kids loving each other. Every once in a while, Stephanie and I experience these moments of grace, as we see our kids generously sharing, or sincerely apologizing and forgiving, or having a blast laughing and playing together. Sometimes the kids don't realize we're watching them, and Stephanie and I steal a glance at each other, and smile.

And I think the joy we share in that moment, is a small glimpse into what the Father, Son, and Spirit share when they see their children here at Northwest loving each another.

Father, Son, and Spirit smiling together as we support each other in small groups, and minister every week to our children and youth, and use musical and technical gifts, and support our church and missionaries and food pantry and benevolence fund, and teach God's Word, and bring a meal to someone after surgery, and serve as deacons and elders, and help with land sale projects, and teach English, and pray for a struggling brother or sister, and help with the church website and Facebook page, and serve on the greeting team, and missions committee, men's and women's ministries, and Financial Peace, and Bread & Water, and Encuentro, and outside ministries, and in so many other ways, formal and informal.

A church family not asking what's the minimum I have do, can I just be a consumer here, rather delighting to serve in love, the Father, Son, and Spirit smiling over all of it.

### **III. The way of love gives holy confidence (3:19-24)**

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<sup>2</sup> I read an article that said Hellerman coined this term in his book, *When the Church Was a Family*.

### **A. There is grace for our failures**

Now as we seek to live this way of love, sometimes we can experience unease in our hearts. As we remember an angry outburst towards a brother or sister, or when we had good intentions to help but never actually followed through, or when we chose not to help. I don't know about you, but I can think of plenty of ways I could be doing more to help others. And so John addresses this, starting in verse 19, which says,

<sup>19</sup>This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: <sup>20</sup>If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

There is a godly conviction that's healthy when we don't walk in the way of love, but John doesn't want the church walking around with condemning hearts or doubting their salvation because of their failures. No, he's wanting to restore their gospel confidence, which had been shaken by the false teachers. So John reminds them that when our hearts condemn us, we remember that God is greater than our hearts.

We can all be "Cain-like" at times, harboring anger, jealousy, even hate. Living more with an attitude of "Am I my brother's keeper?" than, "I am my brother's keeper."

Back when Cain murdered his brother Abel in Genesis 4, the text says that Abel's blood cries out to God from the ground for Cain's cursing. But the good news for us is that Jesus is the true and better Abel. Like Abel, Jesus is innocently murdered, but rather than His blood crying out for our cursing, it cries out for our forgiveness. That God, who is greater than our hearts, has forgiven all our sin because Jesus paid for it with His blood on the cross, it's all been taken care of.

### **B. The blessings of abiding**

And John wants the church to respond to God's amazing love with love that leads to enjoying all the blessings that come when we love. As verse 21 says:

<sup>21</sup>Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God <sup>22</sup>and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him.

<sup>23</sup>And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. <sup>24</sup>The one who keeps God's commands lives 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.

Right after college, Stephanie and I interned at a church, and our senior pastor set up a meeting with a godly old seminary president named Earl Radmacher. I asked Dr. R what he wished he knew in his 20s that he knows now. And he said he wished he knew sooner the difference between living lukewarm vs. living really abiding in Jesus. A Christian not satisfied with their union with God, but hungering for more communion with God day by day. And the level of confidence in prayer, and answers to prayer, and joy and purpose in life, and experience of God's pleasure when you're living to please God, loving one another as He commanded us.

The way of love is hard, sometimes very hard, but John here wants the church to enjoy the holy confidence we experience that verse 21 talks about when we walk in the way of love.

At the very core of everything is this Triune God: Father, Son, and Spirit, love beyond understanding flowing between the persons of the Trinity, and we've been invited into this family of love, so let's go deeper into that love. It's mind blowing, that God is among us and at work in us and through us as we love Him and our brothers and sisters, it's the family way.

### **Conclusion:**

#### **A. Let's live the way of love**

So our "next step" this morning as a church family is to live the way of love. That's always part of our "next steps" with Jesus, living His way of love.

#### **B. The Lord's Supper (adoption illustration) encourages love**

And we start applying it now as we come around the Lord's table, our family table, together. In a minute we'll distribute the bread and cup. If you don't yet know Jesus as your Savior, please let the bread and cup pass. Instead, we invite you to believe that God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son Jesus so that whoever believes in Him will never perish but have eternal life. Maybe you've heard this message before, but maybe now, you're really hearing it for the first time, of just how much God loves you. If that's you, won't you receive His invitation, come to Jesus, trusting that He died for your sins and rose from the dead so that you can be adopted into His family, and then begin to live His way of love.

And for those in God's family, let's wait until all have been served the bread or cup so that we can eat and drink together around the family table. Now, let's pray... Ushers, please distribute the bread.

As I've thought about our family's way of love this week, I've thought of Gary and Craig Barnes. Gary was one of my professors in seminary, and he and his brother Craig have served as pastors and grew up in a pastor's home.

Gary and Craig's dad pastored among the marginalized in Long Island, including a husband and wife who were both heavy drug users and had a son. One day, their dad got a call from Roger, the couple's 11 year old son, saying, "I can't wake my parents up." Fearing the worst, their dad drives to the housing project. And he sees Roger watch as the coroner zips bags over both his mom and dad, who died from a heroin overdose. He tells the authorities he'll take Roger home for the night and they can figure out what to do with Roger in the morning.

The pastor knew there wasn't any family to care for Roger, and on the drive home, he decides to adopt him. They arrive home in the middle of the night, and Gary and Craig are woken up by their dad, who says, "This is Roger, he's your brother from now on."

Roger, having been raised by parents addicted to drugs in a totally unstructured environment, had no idea how to live in a pastor's family. And this was a strict one, Craig describes his parents as the "green berets" of pietists, having never met a rule they didn't like.

So it was a very difficult adjustment for everyone, most of all Roger. But every day his new parents kept at it, lovingly teaching Roger what it meant to be part of the Barnes family.

Many of the lessons Roger learned took place around the family table, with their mom, who was like the Holy Spirit figure in the family, teaching Roger the family way. Both parents were quiet introverts, but wanting to keep Roger at the table, they would talk and talk and talk, just trying to teach Roger to connect with the family, to stay at the table.

And for the next few years, the most common phrase around the table was "No, no, Roger, that's not what we do in this family." Roger would get angry and start yelling, and mom would say, "No, no, we don't yell at the table, and we never use that word at this table" which was the only time Roger got to leave the table early.

"No, no, you don't have to hurt your brothers to get what you want." "No, no, Roger we show respect to each other in this family." "No, no, you don't just get up and leave, it's your turn to do the dishes tonight." Roger didn't understand about dishes, so mom explains about caring for each other in the family and family responsibilities.

Over and over so many lessons that Roger had to learn about what it meant to be a member of the Barnes family. Did he have to learn these lessons to be brought into the family?

No, he became a family member by grace, when his new father brought Roger home and woke up Gary and Craig and introduced Roger as their brother. Later Craig marveled at how Roger became part of the Barnes family, his joint heir, simply by their father's declaration.

Roger came into the family only by grace, but then he had to learn a lot of lessons and make a lot of changes to embrace his identity in the Barnes family. By the time Roger finished high school, he had made many changes, because he was thankful for his gift of a new life. As he grew in understanding of what his parents had done for him, Roger became a gracious person himself, only ungracious when he felt like Gary and Craig weren't appreciating their parents enough.

When Roger finished high school, he wanted his parents to be proud. He didn't have the grades to get into college, school was always hard for him, so Roger decided to join the Army at the height of the Vietnam conflict, becoming part of a special ops force that saw a lot of combat.

One day, the Barnes family received word that Roger had been killed in action. Roger's death described as a heroic act of self-sacrifice that saved many. Craig remembers his mom's sobbing most of all from that dark day, and also remembers her saying, "A hero, a hero, who would've thought that frightened, angry kid we brought into this family would turn out to be a hero, how did that happen?" Craig said, "Mom, I know how it happened. It was all those table lessons, where you taught Roger what it meant to be your beloved son, and he bought it, he believed it, and he changed."

We don't walk in the way of love to earn our way into God's family. We walk in the way of love because we've been adopted into God's family of love. All because of what Jesus did for us, we didn't earn our place in the family, and even more startlingly, we can't un-earn it, we're the beloved of God. And that's what we celebrate here at our Lord's Table, the family table.

**Bread** - This bread represents Christ's body, broken for us. Eat it in joyful remembrance of Jesus. Let's praise Him.

While we're at the family table, may I ask, have you brought anything that doesn't belong here? Is the Spirit saying to you, or to me, "No, no we don't bring that anger to this table, we forgive our brothers and sisters." As Craig Barnes likes to joke, you're not actually going to try to be the victim at the table of our crucified Lord are you? No no, that won't work here, you can't be a victim in this family, you're not a victim, you're the beloved.

Or perhaps the Spirit is speaking to you, "No, no, in this family we don't always let others serve us, you're part of the family, and it's time to start serving here in the church." That is our family way, the way of love.

**Cup** – This cup represents Christ's blood, spilled for us, to bring us home. Drink it in joyful remembrance of Him. Let's pray...

**Dismissal** – Go in peace to live the way of love.