

Next week is the last in our series, Love Illuminated, in which we've been going through 1st John. We've been learning what it means to truly love God and to be loved by God. In week one we saw that God has provided eternal life for human beings and we don't need to wait until we die in order to experience it. John talks about psuche life: the life we experience every day, all the things that happen to us, and also the zoe aeon life, eternal life. We can experience eternal life right now through faith in Christ. He also makes it clear that Jesus is not only the messenger of that life, but he himself is life. So we enter into eternal life through a loving relationship with Jesus.

Then we looked at what it means to have a loving relationship with Jesus. John says this happens when we walk in the light and goes on to explain that to walk in the light means to walk in obedience and in honesty to God. If you walk in honesty with God about your sins and your struggles, but not in obedience. Then you end up living a self-absorbed, self-centred life, and it's hard to experience intimacy in any relationship, particularly with God. On the other hand, if you walk in obedience, but not honesty with God, you become self-righteous and judgemental.

John then talks about the whole issue of how easy it is for a group of Christ followers, people who have made the decision to follow Jesus, as best they can – for their love to become perverted and redirected in other areas. He calls that 'love for the world' – over desire for things that we can see, touch or experience – and how that links in to the difference between believing and knowing. Believing something in your head is different from knowing something – knowing is a deeper thing and he says we need to get to know God.

Today I want to ask you a question, "Do you have anyone in your life that you are having a difficult time loving right now?" You don't need to raise your hands just in case it's the person you're sitting next to! My hope is that by the end of our time together you'll feel a little bit less like that.

1 John 3:10 *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 God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.*

This is the main point John is going to make, and it may cause a little cringe factor for some of us today. John reminds us that we are all part of a spiritual family, but there are only two spiritual families. He is quite clear, there are the children of God and the children of the devil. There are lots of people, maybe even people you know, maybe even you, and you hear that and you ask, "Really?" You know it

seems a little limited and almost as if there should be at least one other alternative. Sometimes people who are looking for another option might express it by saying something like this, “I don’t consider myself a spiritual person. I don’t consider myself a person of faith. Faith may be good for you and be a comfort for you, but I’m not a person of faith.”

The reality, however, is that everyone is a spiritual person. Everyone has to take leaps of faith in order to function in this world, e.g. If someone says, “I don’t really buy into the idea of a God imposing their idea of morality on me. Everyone should simply decide for themselves what is morally right and morally wrong and then be consistent with their belief.” The thing is, that statement, or that belief, is actually a profound statement of faith. It is based on some assumptions and beliefs: the first is that there is no judgement day; there was there can be no judge higher than yourself; it assumes that you are competent enough to run your own life; it assumes that ignoring God and doing your own thing is a better way to live life. Intellectually, that’s fine, but none of that is based on any scientific method. It can’t be good science, because it is not based on any empirical data that can be tested or approved, it is in fact a profoundly religious position. It is a belief that requires a profound leap of faith on the part of the person who takes that position.

So how does this connect with the children of the devil thing that John is talking about? He is not talking about something dramatic or the kind of thing that so often is portrayed in films and stories involving satanic worship or ritual. He’s talking about something perfectly normal and mundane. He’s talking about the biblical reality that the devil was the first created being who said I am competent enough to run my own life. He was the first one who said my will be done, rather than thy will be done. And that was the devil’s basic appeal to Adam and Eve in the Garden - who is God to tell you what you can and can’t do? Essentially, he was telling them they were competent to run their own lives and to make their own decisions. So what John is talking about when he talks about children of God and children of the devil is that there are these two basic approaches to life - my will be done or thy will be done. Both of those are profound leaps of faith.

The reason John makes a big deal about this and talks about these two spiritual families, and which family you’re in, is because the kind of love that John is calling us to in 1<sup>st</sup> John is not some vain attempt to earn your way into the right family, it’s simply the result of being a part of that family. It’s just the result of saying yes to the father’s love for you. At the start of the chapter John pens these amazing words 1 John 3:1 *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!*

God has lavished love on you, and if you have said yes to that love that God has lavished on you, then you are a child of God. Why is that so important to understand? Because the radical love that God calls us to show to others grows out of our sense of identity, of who we are. The kind of radical love that he wants you to show to other people in your life, your spouse, your children, your neighbours grows out of your sense of how you understand who you are, what your identity is. ***We don't love in order to be loved and accepted by God, we love because we are loved and accepted by God,*** and there is a profound difference between those two things. It is a totally different psychology of behaviour in those two realities. Now think about this in terms of the dynamics of your own family. If you ever have a struggle trying to understand the dynamics of the relationship between us and the father it's not a bad idea to think about the way in which families function, and when they function in healthy ways and when they function in dysfunctional ways and you begin to get the dynamics of the relationship that Scripture talks about when it talks about the kind of family relationship between us and God. Think about the dynamics of your own family. If kids do loving things in the family and behave in a certain way, show affection and love out of some vain attempt for the parents to love them, or to love them more because of the way they behave, then that is an incredibly unhealthy, dysfunctional family. You may have grown up in a family like that and still bear of the scars. The scars of that kind of relationship can be so profound when you grow up in the environment where your attempts at loving are an attempt to try to gain love from someone.

However, if children do loving things because they have experienced the overwhelming love of their parents that builds a healthy dynamic. Any councillors will tell you that you can have two children from those two kinds of families and they may function the same way, and behave the same way, they may do the same things and express love in very similar looking ways, but there is a totally different psychology going on in the life of the child who is loving in order to get his parents to love him or her more, and the child who is loving because they have experienced the lavish love of their parents.

What happens, according to John when we love out of the love that God has lavished on us? Now he tells us in our reading today - we should love one another; we know that we've passed from death to life because we love our brothers. John goes all the way back to the garden, to the ancient story of Cain and Abel. The story of one brother killing another and he says that when we don't love there is a death that takes place just as there was a death that took place when Cain killed his brother. In this case, as he fast forwards to the time of writing to his audience, it's

a death that they experience, and that we experience, and conversely if we do love we pass from death into life.

The question that fascinates a lot of people when it comes to death and life is the question, “Is there life after death?” When people ask that question they are thinking of mainly in terms of the psuche life that we’ve talked about over the last few weeks. That is life that is made up of all of her relationships and experience and is very linear - it’s hour after hour, day after day, year after year. At the end of that life the natural question is, ‘is there a life beyond death?’ The biblical answer for that is yes, there is a resurrection and it is hope of new life because Christ himself was raised from the dead. And we, if we are in Christ, will be raised from death to life. But John is addressing a different question than any question about life after death. The question that John is addressing is, “Is there life before death?” That’s the question he’s asking.

He’s asking if it’s possible in this world that has been so marred by sin where right from the beginning, from the time of Cain there has been something in humanity that has caused us to hurt and to kill and to not love fully, to hedge our bets when it comes to love and to love conditionally and selfishly, so that we can get something out of someone else, is it possible in this world that has been so marred by sin and where love has become so perverted - is it possible for us to experience something more, something better?

John’s answer is yes. It is possible to pass from death to life right now and it happens when we lavish on others the same love that God has lavished on us. He’s saying that when we love others like God loves us something real happens in our lives, something alive happens when we love others the way God has loved us. But how do we really know what love is? We started this whole series by recognising the difficulty in knowing what love is because we use the word love in so many different ways to describe so many emotions and different things, and the danger is that the word love gets used and given any definition that people choose to give it. What you mean when you say I love you, or I give love, or I feel love can mean something totally different to what somebody else means, and we end up defining love in whatever we seems right to us. So what does it really mean to love? John tells us exactly what it looks like – 1 John 3:16 *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 and sisters.*

That’s a wonderfully poetic phrase but obviously he doesn’t mean that we would be willing to physically die for someone, because we can only do that once. He’s

talking about a lifestyle of laying down your life for others. So what does that mean? He gives us the answer in verses 17 & 18: *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? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

The King James version has a very interesting translation of verse 17: *But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?*

At first glance, when you read that passage you would think that shutting up your bowels to someone would be a good thing! We certainly wouldn't want the opposite. The word that is translated bowels is the word splanknon which doesn't relate to a specific organ, but refers everything within your abdominal cavity.

When the Greeks used that word, it was usually in reference to the centre of a persons being – the essence of a person. So somebody today said, I hate their guts, they are not talking about the intellectual views and beliefs of that person, nor are they talking of individual internal organs, they are talking about the fact that they hate them as a person. So what John is meaning here is that until something changes in the splanknon, in the very centre of our being, then nothing really changes at all. Maybe even more importantly, until something changes in the very centre of being no definitive action is taken.

What causes us to take action on things is not the fact that we intellectually give assent to them, what causes us to take action, is when we know them at the centre of our being, and we have agreed with them to the point where it has become part of our life. You can see, and you can affirm, and you can believe and you can give intellectual assent to all the things that we believe in church; you can affirm the importance of loving your neighbour and the person with whom you are having a difficult time, but until something changes in the very centre of your being you will not act in a different way towards them.

In fact, here's the irony, sometimes being part of a church community that reflects your value system and the things that you believe to be true, can actually inoculate you from taking action on those things. For example, a lot of people want to be part of a church that shows compassion to the poor, that gives the time, energy and resources to the most vulnerable, a church that feeds the hungry clothes the naked and seeks justice for the oppressed, but sometimes the fact that they believe those things are important, and want to be part of a community that also believes they are important, can lull them into inactivity when it comes to their own lives. That's because nothing has really changed in the splanknon, in the centre of their being

about those particular things. They have given intellectual assent to the importance of all of that stuff, but they haven't really internalised that.

It's interesting that the other place this word *splankon* is used is in the story, known as the story of the good Samaritan. It's about a Jewish man who is beaten up by robbers and left for dead, and everyone who sees the man walks by and leave him except a Samaritan man who stops and helps despite being an enemy of the injured man. Right in the middle of the story it says that when the Samaritan saw him, he took pity on him. The phrase took pity is from the same root word *splankon* and it describes the deep, gut wrenching emotional tidal wave that the Samaritan feels towards this man. A complete identification with this man in a righteous rage towards the injustice he has experienced. Without this *splankon*, without this change in the centre of the being of this person, the story degenerates into an act of welfare. But this story is not fundamentally about how to take care of the injured or how to take on somebody else's burden, or even how to be a good neighbour - it's a story about gut wrenching identification with someone who is hurting. It's about allowing God to disrupt the very centre of your being because of something that you know demands a loving response on your part.

Sometimes we give intellectual assent to the importance of being patient with difficult people and that is important; we give intellectual assent to forgiving people who have hurt us and that is part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus; but when it comes to this particular person and being patient with them or forgiving them in sometimes no action is taken, because we have not allowed God to disrupt the centre of our being on that issue. Until we do, nothing changes. We may say the right things and believe the right things, but nothing changes. We do not take action on it.

The entire context of 1st John is that everything in our relationship with God is a gift: the gift of breath; the gift of life; the gift of forgiveness; the gift of resurrection; everything that we have in our relationship with God is a gift. We receive what we do not deserve, and so we offer to others what they do not deserve. That's the essence of this love. We have received what we do not deserve, and so we can offer to others what they don't deserve.

All of which means that moaning and complaining, keeping a score card and having a sense of entitlement has no place in the life of a child of God. Of course we struggle with these. We feel hurt and pain, and we need to bring all of these to God. It is only when we come to God and experience the love that he has lavished on us that we are able to do the thing he calls us to do, lavish that love on others in

return. Without him changing us at the very core of our being that's impossible to do. Unless we're so overwhelmed with gratitude and living in the reality of God's lavish love for us we can never truly love our brothers and sisters.