

1 JOHN 3:11-24—THE MARK OF A CHRISTIAN

INTRO: There is a problem in the church which is reflected in the attitudes of people who profess to be Christians and in how they treat others. For example, let's look at giving. The apostle Paul said that if we have more than we need, we should be generous and share with others to help the poor and the needy and to build the KOG. However, statistics indicate that Christians only give about 2.5% of their income, which is less than they gave during the Great Depression when they gave 3.3%, and is way less than the OT biblical standard of 10%.

Those giving statistics reflect a deeper problem in the hearts of many professing Christians. A recent Barna Group study found that one-quarter of 18- to 29-year-olds said, "Christians demonize everything outside of the church." Twenty-two percent said, "The church is ignoring the problems of the real world." David Kinnamann is the president of the Barna Group. A few years ago he wrote a book entitled *unChristian*. The book states, "Christians are supposed to represent Christ to the world. But . . . something has gone terribly wrong. Using descriptions like 'hypocritical,' 'insensitive,' and 'judgmental,' young Americans share an impression of Christians that's nothing short of . . . unChristian."

This tells us one of two things regarding the Christians who are like that. Either: (A) They themselves are being disobedient to Christ and therefore are in great danger, or (B) Although they may *call* themselves Christians, they may in fact not be Christians at all—which puts them in even greater danger.

As a result of all this, one study found that 70% of Protestants stop attending church by age 23. Consequently, the church is losing or has lost what remaining influence it has in society.

So what do we do about it? In order to do anything about this, we need to have a clear understanding of what *real* faith, *real* Christianity, looks like. Then we need to assess what changes we need to make, both individually and corporately, and make them. In short, we need to clearly understand God's description and prescription for what *he* wants individual Christians and the church as a whole to be like—and then we need to do it.

Today's passage of Scripture—1 John 3:11-24—gives us God's description and prescription for what Christians and the church are to be like. So let's take a look at what it says and the implications for us. **[READ]** Let me add that the word translated "brothers" or "brother" in **vv.13-17** refers to siblings in a family and therefore applies equally to females and to males, sisters as well as brothers.

PROP: The mark of right-standing with God is showing practical love to others.

O/S: (1) **vv.11-15** show us the necessity of love for those who claim to be in right-standing with God; (2) **vv.16-18** discuss the practical outworking of that love toward others; and (3) **vv.19-24** reveal how God works in *us* as we demonstrate practical love to others.

vv.11-15

v.11 begins with the word "for." This tells us that it relates back to what was said in **v.10**. So let me read **v. 10 [READ]**. **vv.11-15** drive the points of **v.10** home: namely, that there are two and only two kinds of people in the world—those who are children of God and those who are children of the devil—and that showing practical acts of love for others is the central demonstration of which camp we are in. When **v.12** takes us all the way back to Cain and Abel, John is telling us that it has always been this way.

Most people, except for a few Satanists, would never say that they are children of the devil. In fact, a large number of people don't even believe that there is a devil. And most people, regardless of whether they are Christians or nonChristians, are pretty decent people. They are not murderers like Cain was. But that doesn't change the fact. Jesus called Satan the "**ruler of the world**" (**John 12:31**) and said that everyone is either part of the "**dominion of Satan**" or the "**dominion of God**" (**Acts 26:18**). That is why, in **v.8** of **ch. 3** of this very epistle, John said that a person whose life is characterized by sin "**is of the devil.**" So everyone is either under the headship of Jesus or—even if he or she doesn't realize it—is under the headship of the devil.

Why is love what distinguishes the children of God from the children of the devil? The reason is because God himself *is* love. He so *loved* the world that he came to earth in the person of Jesus for *us*. Therefore, the night before he died, Jesus said, "**A new commandment I give you: love one another even as I have loved you. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).**" IOW, if love is not central to us, then we really don't know God and we are not Jesus' disciples.

There are at least three important implications for us in vv.11-15:

(1) There is a fundamental difference between Christians and nonChristians. **v.14** says that Christians "**have passed from death to life.**" Jesus himself said the same thing in **John 5:24 [READ]**. IOW, just as everyone is either under the headship of Jesus or the headship of the devil, **v.14** is telling us that those who are

Christians are truly alive, but those who are not are really walking dead men. **Eph 2:1-2, 4-5** makes the same point. There Paul says [READ].

(2) **vv.11-12** exhort us that, since Christians are fundamentally different from nonChristians, **“we should love one another”** and **“we should not be like Cain who was of the evil one.”** What this means is that how we *live* is to reflect what we truly *are*. This is telling us that how we live—above all the love we show to others—is the outward and visible sign of our inward and spiritual state. It is the proof and the test of whether we truly have passed from death to life or are still just walking dead men.

And v.15 makes clear that the issue is not just external behavior but has its roots on the inside. In **v.15** John equates an attitude of hatred with murder itself, just as Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount. The reason is that an attitude of hatred is inconsistent with the mind of Christ but IS consistent with the mind and attitude of Satan, whom Jesus said was **“a murderer from the beginning”** (**John 8:44**). You see how all of these things—our external actions and our internal attitudes—reflect and reveal who our real lord is: either Jesus or the devil.

In light of v.15, we need to seriously assess how do we think and feel about certain people or types of people. Let me give you a personal example: I used to hate Muslims. I realized that I should not have that attitude and prayed that God would take it out of my heart. The more I studied Islam, the more I came to realize the problem is not Muslims but is Islam itself. I came to see that Muslims are victims—they are enslaved and imprisoned in an oppressive system that is incredibly difficult to break free from. They need to see the love of Jesus Christ more than practically any other group in the world. So, yes, God did change my heart—and I assure you that if he can change me, he can change anybody.

(3) So far, we have seen that there is a fundamental difference between Christians and nonChristians and that Christians are to live lives consistent with their status as children of God. The third implication of **vv.11-15** is that *if* we think, feel, and act like Christ, we can expect the world to hate us. The reason is that a life of self-sacrificial love is contrary to the way of the world. You might think that a person who is constantly sacrificing himself or herself and loving the unlovable would be looked up to. But think about it—such a life implicitly is also criticizing and condemning the value system of nonbelievers. Jesus led such a life of self-sacrificial love perfectly, and look at what that got him.

A second reason why living a life consistent with our new status as children of God will cause the world to hate us is because we are the only people who can tell nonbelievers about Jesus and the new life he brings. In fact, we have been commanded by Jesus to go into all the world and tell people about him. But telling people about Jesus confronts them: it makes some people uncomfortable and angers others, because no matter how nicely and tactfully we say it, the bottom line of our message is, **“We have found the answer and you haven’t; we have found eternal life and you don’t have it.”** But Jesus is the only hope for people. Consequently, it would be unloving *not* to tell people about Jesus.

How are we doing with this? I know evangelism makes some Christians uncomfortable. But think about this: If you discovered a cure for cancer, or diabetes, or any other physical sickness, wouldn’t you naturally tell others, especially those who had that disease? Of course we would! If your friends found out that you knew of the cure but *hadn’t* told them about it, they would rightly condemn you and say, “What kind of a friend are you?” So why are we so hesitant to tell people about Jesus who is the only cure for the biggest things that oppress us—sin, the devil, and death itself?

This brings us to vv.16-18

These verses give us a very practical example of what love looks like. **v.16** begins with Jesus’ example of laying down his life for us. It then parallels **John 15:12-13** where Jesus said [READ]. We cannot die for the sins of the world like Jesus did—but we can live for other like he did. **v.17** of today’s passage tells us how, by exhorting us not to close our hearts against those in need but to give of our substance to help the needy. That parallels **Jas 2:15-17** which says [READ]. Remember: since we have passed from death to life, our faith is to be a living faith, not a dead faith.

Many years ago, Don Francisco had a song which said, “Love is not a feeling, it’s an act of your will.” That is exactly what Jesus said, and that is what John is saying here in **v.17**. That’s why he concludes in **v.18** by saying, **“Let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”**

We’ve all heard the phrase, “Actions speak louder than words.” That is true—but it’s more than that. When it comes to love, our actions—how we treat people—reveal the state of our heart—the true state of our faith. That’s why **1 John 4:20** says [READ]. We need to ask ourselves: Do we really love others **“not in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”** What are we doing—specifically and practically—in that regard? What are we doing with our money to show our love for those in need?

Here is a suggestion I heard from John Ortberg which is very practical that we can do. Jesus summed up the centrality of love by saying we are to **“love our neighbor as we love ourself”** and **“do unto others as you**

would have them do unto you.” That is known as the Golden Rule. We need to become “Golden Rule” people. IOW, think of all the ways you’d like people to treat you, and then you treat them just like that.

In any situation, be thinking, “What would I want or how would I like to be treated if I were in that person’s shoes?” For example, someone wants to cut in front of you in traffic. That’s a Golden Rule moment. Why not smile and wave him forward? You won’t die. Or, someone is droning on about his or her personal issues; spend the time focusing on and listening to him even though you’d rather be doing something else. You’re applying the Golden Rule. Seriously try looking for Golden Rule moments for a week. Ask the Holy Spirit to keep nudging and prompting you. We might be amazed at what we see.

That brings us to vv.19-24

This entire passage has been focusing on the importance of demonstrating love. This last section puts our acts of love in their proper perspective. The emphasis so far might lead some people to conclude that we *earn* our status as children of God by doing acts of love. But this last section of the passage reminds us that our acts of love are the *evidence* that we *already* are children of God because of our faith in Jesus. Our faith in Christ is what rightly relates us to God. His presence and working in our lives through the Holy Spirit is what *enables* us to love one another.

It’s like Eph 2:8-10. There Paul says [READ]. Notice that we are saved only by God’s grace through faith. Our works—including our acts of love to others—has nothing to do with our *becoming* saved. But as **Eph 2:10** points out, we are saved **“for good works”**—including acts of love—**“which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”** Those good works are the proof that the faith we profess is real, saving faith.

Christians often doubt their salvation. That is why **vv.19-20** of today’s passage tell us that there are two ways we can know we belong to the truth: (1) **v.19** begins by saying, **“By this.”** “This” is referring to what was just said in **v.18** that we are to **“love not in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”** **v.19** is saying that by loving in deed and in truth **“we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our hearts.”** This is telling us that we should look clearly at the objective evidence of our lives. The acts of love we show others are the signposts that we are, in fact, on the right road.

Nevertheless, we often still condemn ourselves. In such cases, **v.20** says that the second source of reassurance is God himself. He is greater than our fickle and condemning hearts. His *word* assures us again and again that Christ has done for us everything that we need. His rising from the dead proved who he is and that his sacrifice on our behalf was accepted. If we believe that—who he is and what he did for us—we are saved. But remember, just as **Eph 2:8-10** said, true saving faith changes us and causes us to begin living lives of love—not perfectly, but progressively as the Holy Spirit works in us.

When we have that reassurance, vv.21-22 of our passage today tell us that this reassurance affects our prayer life. **v.22** says that we can have confidence in prayer because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. That is echoing Jesus himself who said in **John 8:28-29**, **“I do nothing on my own authority . . . for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.”** Here in **1 John**, John is saying that when we are rightly related to God through Christ, as we see the Holy Spirit changing us, we will have the confidence to let go of our own selfish desires and trust *His* will. That is what results in his answering our prayers, because he always answers prayer in accordance with *his* will.

v.23 summarizes this by saying [READ]. Note that “commandment” is singular, not plural: It is believe in Jesus and love one another. The first part of the commandment—believe in Jesus—is logically prior to loving others, because that is what changes our lives and enables us to love others. The flip side of that coin is that loving others is the proof that our faith is real.

v.24 concludes by mentioning obeying his “commandments,” plural—IOW all of the specific things we are to do as people of faith. When we obey what he says, we not only please him but demonstrate that we are in him and he abides in us through the Holy Spirit. Jesus had promised that he would send the Holy Spirit to actually live inside and guide those who come to him in faith. John is concluding this passage by reminding us of this great fact. The Holy Spirit is the one who not only enables us to do acts of love but assures us that we are his.

CONCL: Let me conclude by emphasizing why this is so important. This passage began by telling us that everyone in the world either is under the headship of Christ (in which case they have passed from death to life) or they are under the headship of the devil (in which case they are simply walking dead men). The whole point of our lives as Christians is to show people God, because he is the source of all life and all goodness. The only way to do that is to know him ourselves.

That is what Christians do—know God—because the Bible says, to be a Christian, one is, by definition, “born again” or “born from above” and receives the heart, mind, and Spirit of Christ. As Jesus himself said,

This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). That is why both individual Christians and the church as a whole are repeatedly called **“the temple of God,” “the temple of the Holy Spirit,”** and **“the body of Christ.”** Make no mistake: There is no difference between knowing God and knowing Christ, because Christ *is* God in human form. Therefore, because Christ is in us and we are in Christ, what *we* are doing is showing people God—what God is like—in human form.

This is the most tremendous responsibility on earth. We do not do it perfectly. But that is why the whole point of our lives is to **“be conformed into the image of Jesus Christ” (Rom 8:29)**—which means that we will think like him, act like him, his values will be our values, and his priorities will be our priorities.

That is why showing love—practical acts of love to others—is central, because God IS love. Love sometimes means having to say “no” (as anyone who is a parent well knows), but do not let that become the tail that wags the dog. The point is that, if I am a Christian, everything I do is showing God—is showing what God is like—to others. Are we showing him truly? Are we showing the *true* God to people or a false God?

Everything we do has significance far beyond what we imagine. That is why our lives are far more important than we realize. And that is why the attitudes and statistics I cited at the beginning are so damning.

But if we go about our lives every day, in every situation, with this mentality, we can change. We can begin showing people God in a much truer way. This should motivate us more and more to be “Golden Rule” people. When that happens, people will clearly see Jesus when they see us—and we can make a tremendous difference in people’s lives.