

Sunday School Lesson

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patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. —Galatians 5:22-23

Exploring The Questions

As you have just read, some powerful words are hidden in this little sermon. So many thoughts are compressed into just a few verses that we will have to look carefully in order to get the full meaning.

It is hard to miss the main points, however: (1) Love for one another is the true mark of a Christian. (2) Christ is the supreme example of love. (3) Our obligation as Christians is to perform acts of charity.

Our problem today is often how we shall express our concern for others. As we saw in the opening story of the lesson, good intentions are not enough. There are all kinds of ways of doing things for other people, but not all of them work out as we expect.

As in so many passages of Scripture in this study, we catch from the writer of First John the unmistakable connection between believing and doing. But we do not know who he was; he identifies himself in Second and Third John only as "the elder."

"Elder" was a popular designation, particularly in the Asian churches, for those who carried on the teaching of the apostles. No other sign of authority would have been necessary for the sermon to be accepted by the people. We may reasonably conclude, then, that First John was written to churches in this elder's sphere of influence and circulated under his supervision.

Another point to note here is the close connection between First, Second, and Third John and the Gospel of John in vocabulary, literary style, and theological ideas. Most scholars believe they were written by the same person or, at least, persons from the same school of thought. This would date First John near the beginning of the second century.

Finding Help

With Your Questions

In 1 John 3, the writer divides men into two classes — those who find the source of their values in God and those who are dominated by the Devil.

Beginning at verse 11, the contrast is drawn between hate, as it is seen in Cain's act of murder, and love, demonstrated in Jesus' willing sacrifice of his own life.

The exhortation in verse 11 to love one another is especially directed at this point to those in the church. Note in verse 16 that the writer talks about laying down our lives "for the brethren." A writer in The Interpreter's Bible explains that one reason for this emphasis was the drawing together of Christians as a result of persecution. But their concern was not limited to persons in the church, for missionary activity provided the setting for John's letters.

Love Conquers Death

The contrast in verse 12 between the evil deeds of Cain and his brother's righteousness is one similarity between First John and the Gospel of John. Both writings teach that darkness hates light and shrinks from it. We can see the connection, then, between righteousness and light and between evil and darkness.

In verse 13 the author is saying: "Do not be surprised that you are hated. This reaction is as old as time — the righteous life is an offense to those whose deeds are evil." As Cain hated Abel, so the pagan world hates Christians.

Love is associated with life; hate, with death or murder. Where Cain deals death, Christ gives life. The meaning of this fact for Christian action is spelled out in verse 16: "We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." This is a familiar New Testament theme.

The Fruits of Love

As I said before, John's letter is straight talk. Those who hate are murderers (verse 15), and no real Christian "has the world's goods . . . yet closes his heart" (verse 17). The final turn of the screw comes in verse 18: Don't just sit there; do something.

C. H. Dodd, a biblical scholar, explains it this way:

"This downright concreteness, almost crudity, in stating the moral requirements of religion, belongs to the genius of New Testament Christianity in general. . . . The fact is that Christianity derived this advantage from its origin among a people (the Jews) for whom religion

was ethical, and morality was expressed in baldly concrete precepts."

Shakespeare put it like this: "They do not love that do not show their love." Another person has defined love as "the willingness to surrender that which has value for our own life to enrich the life of another."

The final verse in Chapter 3 reminds the Christian that unless we keep Jesus' command to love, we can have no intimate union with God, no mutual indwelling ("abide in him, and he in them"), no spiritual in-

spiration. This statement does not mean that the elder has taken us back to salvation by works. But works of love are such a certain by-product of the Christian faith that they identify the Christian.

Love in Daily Life

One problem for Christians, of course, is that we tend to wait for some heroic act by which to "lay down our lives." But the expression of love can be a very mundane, close-to-home sort of thing.

This point is illustrated in a story told by Keith Miller. He confesses that in the early years

of his marriage, when things went wrong, he would try to set them right by bringing his wife a present. He notes, however, that this practice never quite brought the result he had hoped for.

Then one wintry evening when he was in the living room trying to read the newspaper, his three little girls began "climbing all over me as if I were a ladder." When he finally gave in to their giggling and squirming and began to play with them, he noticed out of the corner of his eye that his wife's

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