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## JESUS LOVES US

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### Part 9 of Jesus Loves His Church

Pastor Mark Driscoll | August 19, 2012

### THE ONE WHOM JESUS LOVED

So what's your nickname? You have a nickname? You ever get a nickname? We tend to only give nicknames to our friends and our enemies, the people we love and hate the most. There's a guy named John in the Bible and he had a nickname. They called him "the one whom Jesus loved." Great nickname.

The story of John is he was a young man, probably in his twenties. He was working in a business with his dad, a fishing company, and along comes Jesus Christ, beginning his preaching and teaching ministry. He calls John to walk away from the family business, his security, his income, and to trust him for the future and to walk with him for whatever Jesus intended. And he walked away from his father's business that he would have inherited as one of the sons. And along with his brother, he became what they called a disciple of Jesus.

He was with Jesus for about three years. He was there when Jesus did his preaching, teaching, healing, casting out demons, walking on water, rising from death. John was there for all of it, and he was part of the inner circle of three disciples. There were twelve, but three got special access to Jesus: Peter, James, and John.

John was the youngest of the disciples and so the relationship between he and Jesus was like big brother and little brother. Maybe Jesus was, I don't know, five or ten years older than John. So think of a big brother who really loves his little brother and conversely, the little brother who really loves his big brother. That's John.

John was there when Jesus died on the cross. John was there when Jesus rose from death. John was there when Jesus ascended back into heaven. John was so aware of Jesus' love, that he couldn't stop talking about it and it shaped his identity and it transformed his destiny.

For you and me, our identity is rooted in someone or something. If our identity is sourced in anyone or anything other than the love of Jesus, it puts us in a really dangerous place for our well being. If we don't believe that we're loved, we'll end up using people, manipulating them, getting into unhealthy relationships. Counselors will call it co-dependency where we have a love addiction and we just need someone to love us.

Or if we believe that we're unloved or unlovable, we become depressed. We become sad. We become, perhaps, even suicidal. "Why is my life worth living if no one cares for me?" When we understand that Jesus loves us, it transforms our identity and it reshapes our destiny. It changes everything. That's exactly what it did for John, the one whom Jesus loved.

So he went from this young man in his twenties to an old man, perhaps a hundred years of age, having walked faithfully as a Christian for seventy-plus years. Jesus' love altered his entire life course. He never was the same, and he spent his entire life talking about the love of Jesus, that Jesus loves us. He saw all the other disciples buried, most of them a brutal, bloody martyr's death. John lived to about A.D. 100. He wrote books of the Bible, 1, 2, and 3 John, as well as Revelation and the Gospel of John.

When he was an old man, church history outside of the Scriptures says that he was too elderly to walk from place to place and church to church. So when he would sort of go on tour, if we can use that language, they would carry the very elderly hundred-year-old John, and they would sit him in a chair up in front of the church because he was too old to stand for long periods of time. And he would just say over and over and over, "You are the children of God, love one another, love one another." And that was his heart's cry throughout his life's ministry.

### LOVE ONE ANOTHER

So today we're going to hear from John about the fact that Jesus loves us from the one whom Jesus loved. We'll be in 1 John 3 beginning in verse 11, and in 1 John 2 he talks about Jesus loves us. In 1 John 4, he talks a lot about Jesus loves us. And we're going to look at the section in the middle, 1 John 3 that Jesus loves us.

Here's how he begins. He says to love one another. First John 3:11, "For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." John's saying, "We're just going to start in Christian kindergarten. Christian kindergarten is this: love." This is the first thing we tell kids, right? "Love one another. Jesus loves us." That's what we tell them. We tell the little kids, "Jesus loves me, this I know." We teach them the little song. Christian kindergarten is love. That's where it all starts, that our God is a Trinitarian God, one God, three persons. God is love. That's what it says in 1 John 4, the next chapter. God is love and God loves us, and we should love one another.

Now here's what I'm assuming: you all agree with that. All right, within Christianity, there's lots of divisions, teams, theologies, traditions, denominations. There is, however, no anti-love movement. Of all the things that have been opposed, there's no group of people saying, "We're against love, kindness, mercy, compassion. The problem is far too much of that. That just needs to go away." We all agree, right, loving one another, good thing. Yes or no? Good thing. He's starting in a very simple place and then he's going to lead us into a very convicting place.

Let me say this, Mars Hill, the greatest threat to our health and well being as a church is not out there, it's in here. It's not the strangers, but the family members. Sometimes it is presented that the greatest threat to the health, well being, forward progress of the church of Jesus Christ, including local churches like ours is out there. It's the politicians. It's whatever.

It's the liberals. It's the conservatives. It's the Democrats. It's the Republicans. It's the Syrians. It's the Iranians. It's the terrorists. It's the whatever-it-is, and certainly, people and things surrounding us in the world do affect, impinge upon our freedoms and our joys and our life, but the greatest threat to our unity, our health, and our progress is us. It's us.

Because what a church is, it's a series of relationships. Between our locations, and our services, and our people, and our Community Groups, and our Redemption Groups, and our elders, and our deacons, and our members, and our team leads, there are all of these relationships, and every single one of them is a potential fault line where people don't love one another. And if they don't love one another, then we have an earthquake and the ground becomes unstable and everyone becomes distracted. And all of a sudden, panic starts to set in and it can happen anywhere.

It means that if you're in a Community Group, if two people in your Community Group choose not to love one another, we can have a real problem, a crisis that actually involves the whole family, perchance, based around that conflicted, unresolved relationship. This is where you get church splits, church fights. This is where there's arguing and acrimony and hostility and escalation.

Here's what I have seen in now sixteen years of ministry at Mars Hill since core group phase, Satan loves it when Christians don't love one another, and he empowers bitter believers. Man, if there's an opportunity for separation, division, acrimony, infighting, conflict, hostility, division, he absolutely involves himself. He likes to magnify minor problems. He likes to escalate minor conflicts. He wants what otherwise could be a reconciled relationship to end up in a war. And you and I are all vulnerable because we're part of Mars Hill Church.

If you're new, welcome, we love you. We're glad to have you. If you're a non-Christian, we love you, we're glad to have you, but there's no way that we think that the problems that we have are primarily going to be caused by you. We acknowledge and accept that the primary problems in the church are always caused by the Christians who call the church home, but don't love one another. It's very important that we're not just a big church, but we're a church that's also big on love.

God's doing something really unique in Mars Hill Church. There's a magazine coming out with their annual list of the biggest, fastest-growing, most influential churches in America. I've been told that out of the eight categories, we're on six of them. What God is doing in our church is loving his church. Jesus loves this church. And what he's doing is very unusual as we grow and expand and people get saved, and non-Christians are watching and other Christians are watching. And our sustained health is really contingent on one simple thing: love one another. It really comes down to that.

The greatest division among the disciples was one of them named Judas Iscariot. Paul, in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, says, "Men will arise from your own number, distort the truth, and lead many astray." The biggest problem for the church is always in the church, and it's people who are not loving one another, but they're fighting with one another or using one another.

## **DO NOT HATE ONE ANOTHER**

So John starts with a simple presumption and assumption. It's a good thing to love one another, right? And the answer is yes. And so he begins with this exhortation, "Love one another." And then he moves to a restriction saying, "Do not hate one another." First John 3:12-15, "We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be surprised—" Don't be shocked, don't freak out when you read the comments in the local paper because something good happened and everybody makes it sound like we're terrorists ruining the universe, "that the world hates you."

Let me start with this: you won't be loved by everyone. If you have fear-of-man issues, insecurity issues, people-pleasing issues, you're going to want this, you're going to want to be loved and loved, loved by the Lord and loved by the world. And when it uses the language here of "world," it's not just talking about nations or cultures or tribes. It's talking about the world system, collective flesh. It's talking about human rebellion organized together against God.

Non-Christians think differently. Non-Christians value differently. Non-Christians see why we're here, where we come from, where we're going, and who will judge us differently. Not only that, we have a completely different authority. We believe in Scripture, the world does not. We believe in Jesus, the world does not. We believe the problem is sin, the world does not. We believe that the answer is Christ, and the world does not. And Jesus loves us and we love Jesus and if we love Jesus, there will be hatred from the world.

Some of you want this: you want the Lord to love you and the world to love you. You want the world and the Lord to both say, "Well done. I'm pleased with you. I agree with you. I have no problem with you. I have no resistance toward you." And you cannot, will not, should not, in any way, anticipate that that is even the remotest possibility. If Satan and the world hates Jesus and you love Jesus, you will be hated because of who you love.

So let me say this: the question is not, dear friend, will you be hated? The question is: will you be hated by the world, or will you be hated by the Lord? The question is not: will you be hated? The question is: who will hate you? Why will they hate you? If Jesus loves you and you love Jesus, the world will hate you. If you love the world, Jesus will hate you.

And because Jesus and this world system, this demonic, evil resistance to the Lordship of Christ is so present on the earth that there is no way you can have both good and evil, God and Satan, the kingdom of God and the world both say that they are pleased with you. Obedience is an act of war to the world. Worship is an act of war to the world. Repentance is an act of war to the world.

Now, we're not to hate the world. We're to, as the Bible says, hate the sin in the world and hate the essence of the world's system but so far as the people in the world are concerned, we're told to even love our enemies. How's it going for you? How many of you, you would say you love Jesus, but you don't even talk about him with your non-Christian friends because you know that they would criticize you, disagree with you, and what you want is their approval? You want their love. You want their affection. You want their acceptance.

I'll let you in on a secret, we worship a guy who got murdered. Okay? What that means is, not everyone loved him. When a crowd got together and shouted, "Crucify him. Crucify him!" What that didn't mean in the literal Greek was "We love him. We love him." It meant, "We hate him. We hate him." And if Jesus was loved by some but hated by others, then to receive the love of Jesus and to love Jesus means similarly we will be loved by some and hated by others. And you just need to get a little thicker skin and you need to, perhaps even though grieving that, you need to come to grips with that. It's going to be that way.

How many of you, your parents don't know you love Jesus? Your family members don't know you love Jesus? Your coworkers, your friends? You don't really talk about Jesus. You certainly don't bring up the Bible and you never say these two words, "Mars Hill." You just don't even go there, okay? It's like pulling a pin on the grenade. It's like, "It's gonna go."

You're going to be hated, so be hated because Jesus loves you. Be hated because you love Jesus. This is not that we should be mean, or rude, or inconsiderate, that we should even love our enemies, but sometimes our enemies will just choose to persist in being our enemies.

## ***Cain and Abel***

Love one another. Do not hate one another. He says there are really only two options, Cain or Abel. Now some of you are familiar with the story, some of you are not. Here's the story, Genesis 1 and 2, God makes everything out of nothing for his glory and our good. Our first parents, Adam and Eve made in the image and likeness of God, no sin nature. They are perfect altogether and they live in the best grocery store ever. It's called Eden. It's filled with fresh fruits and fresh vegetables. It makes Trader Joe's look like a 7-Eleven. It's amazing. Okay?

And so they live in this perfect garden that God made, organic, natural, holistic diet. The sun is shining. God loves them. There is no sin. There is no sickness. There is no Satan. There is no suffering. No one's gonna die. Everything is perfect. And God tells them that they can partake of the whole grocery store called the Garden of Eden with one exception, there's one particular thing that they're not permitted to partake of.

And what do they do? The one thing they're not allowed to do. Isn't that amazing? We do the same thing. God can give us rich grace and he gives something that is forbidden, and we rebel against him and go for the one thing that he told us not to. And then we tragically find that it was bad for us and he wasn't trying to limit our freedom, he was trying to increase our joy and we wounded ourselves, which is what foolish children do who don't listen to their parents. And the Father's rules are always to protect the children, not to restrict, inhibit, limit them in any way.

And so our first parents rebel against God and as a result, they become sinners by nature and choice. They then give birth, after the fall, after sin enters the world, and there are two sons, Cain and Abel, the first brothers. Any of you guys have a brother? You guys ever fight? It goes a long way back. Cain and Abel fight, but not at first.

They grow up with a sin nature and at this point, they're men working their trade as young men do. Genesis 4 records their two vocations. I'll make sure I get this right. Cain was a farmer and Abel was a herdsman. So Cain's working the ground and producing fruit and vegetation. Abel is a herdsman, he's raising animals. Noble professions, yes or no? Yeah, throughout the Bible, these are godly, noble professions, a farmer and a herdsman.

This goes on for many years. They're working their job and occasionally they get together and they have church. They come to meet with the Lord. That's what church is, it's the people of God coming to meet with God. And when they come, they bring their offering. Now it's important here, the language of Genesis 4 is not sacrifice, but it's an offering, just like you bring your offering.

Some of you will give in cash. Some of you will give in credit. Some of you will give in check. Some of you will bequeath real estate to the cause of Jesus and the forward progress of the church. It's different ways of bringing your offering. You bring your offering, your gift unto the Lord. You're giving to the Lord who gave to you.

And this goes on for many years. And Genesis 4 records the fact that when they get together for church, it is customary for each of them to bring their firstfruits. Firstfruits is what God requires in the Bible. It's your first and your best. See, what we tend to do is we tend to give away all of our money to all of our obligations. If there's anything left, we give some to the Lord, and there's never any left, so we don't.

Meanwhile, the government comes in with a brand-new F word called FICA and they take firstfruits. Okay? And they just take, before you even get paid, the government got theirs. So the government's put themselves in the position of God where they always get the first. They're the first fork into the middle of the table. "That's mine." That's the government, okay?

Now, what an offering is, an offering is taking first and best and giving that to the Lord, realizing, recognizing that everything we have comes from the Lord and thanking him for his provision and then living wisely off of whatever is left for us and our family. Now, both of these men, this seems to be their pattern and habit, they give their offering to the Lord and they give of their firstfruits and they give according to their vocation. So, Cain would bring produce from his field, and Abel would bring an animal from his herd. Perfectly acceptable. Again, these are not sacrifices. These are offerings. Perfectly acceptable.

Genesis 4 records an occasion where, in their little church service, God rejects Cain and his offering and receives Abel and his offering. And from that point, the commentators are very confused. I've read literally maybe fifty-plus interpretations, speculations about why Cain was rejected and Abel was accepted.

Here's my belief. The problem was not what they brought in their hands, but what they brought in their heart. And the confusion is if you look at what they brought in their hands, it's not like one was bad and the other was good. They're both good. It would be like you today, one of you saying, "Well, I'm gonna give cash." And the other says, "I'm gonna write a check." And God says, "I love one, not the other." Well, in the end, those are both acceptable offerings.

So why? Well, it was not what was in their hands and visible. It was what was in their heart and only visible to the Lord. Here in 1 John 3 he says that Cain's offering was unacceptable. It was unrighteous. Hebrews 11:4 says that Cain's offering, unlike Abel's, was without faith. That's really very important because, see, what is visible to us is the outward. What is visible to God is the inward. That's where the Bible says, "Man looks at the outward and God looks at the," what? "The heart."

So, let's take this church meeting with Cain and Abel and apply it to our current situation. Because outwardly, they look the same, but inwardly, they're very different. It would be like you and I today. The person sitting next to you or in front of you or in the rear of you, they got up at the same time that you did. They got in their car like you. They drove to church like you. They parked and walked in like you. They sat down like you. They're listening to the sermon like you. They'll give their offerings like you. They'll sing the songs and raise their hand like you. They'll take Communion like you. They may even carry in the same Bible as you. They may even leave and see you in Community Group this week, sitting on the same couch as you.

And looking down, the question would be, well, why did God accept one and reject the other? Why? Because you can be doing religious things externally without loving God internally. You can do religious things externally without loving one another internally. And God knows the heart. And here's what counts, not just what is seen, but what is unseen, not just the what, but the why. The motive really counts.

So let me ask you this, how's it going for you today? Are you even doing the external? Some of you say, "I don't sing. I don't pray. I don't give. I don't read the Bible. I don't want to go to Community Group. I don't even—I'm beyond the point of even pretending externally that I do love the Lord or that I love my brothers and sisters." Are you a person who's more religious and you want outwardly to appear very pious and holy and godly, but inwardly you don't love the Lord, and you haven't really received the love of the Lord?

What he's saying is that just as Cain and Abel were a family, so church is like a family. And just like Cain and Abel had a conflict, so you could have a conflict. And just like Cain hated Abel, you could hate your brothers and sisters, and he uses that language of brothers and sisters. Or particularly I should say, brothers. And when he uses the language of brothers, it includes the sisters.

Now, some of you in our hearing, we're two thousand years removed. It can sound like "Oh, the brothers? So the Bible doesn't care about women?" No, actually the Bible does and here in the language of brothers, it's including both male and female Christians in the legal category of brothers because, hear me on this, in that culture, the brothers got the family name, not the sisters. The brothers got the family inheritance, not the sisters. The brothers can conduct business on behalf of the family, not the sisters. The brothers could testify in court on behalf of the family, not the sisters. So if he said, "brothers and sisters," it could be heard that the ladies are second class. In calling us all "brothers," it's a legal category and position. It means that both the men and the women in Christ are equal and both first class with all the rights that come by being adopted by the Father into the family of God, the church.

And so we are to treat one another like family. Any of you ever fought with your family? That's what families do. But it's important to resolve the relationships with your family, otherwise what you do is you involve everyone else, and you divide the family, and you destroy the family, and you devour the family. And we're supposed to what one another? Love one another. Don't hate one another.

Now, this, perhaps, is the problem with Cain and Abel. Abel comes to worship the Lord and brings his offering, and what is in his hand is acceptable to the Lord, and what is in his heart is acceptable to the Lord. Cain comes to provide his offering. What's in his hands is acceptable to the Lord, but what's in his heart is not—perhaps because Cain is focused on Abel, and not the Lord.

Do you know it's possible to come to church and to spend more time thinking about other people than the Lord? Honestly, when you pulled in, you parked next to somebody with a better car or any car. You thought to yourself, "Wow, that's a nice car. I wish I had one of those." Coveting.

Do you judge other people? "I don't know if a Christian should drive that. I don't know if a Christian should wear that." How many of you ladies walking in, you're looking at the dress, looking at the shoes, looking at the hair, looking at the makeup thinking, "Oh, she thinks she's something. She's nothing. That's just—no. Wait till she has kids." You know? "She'll be lucky to take a shower once every presidential election. She'll be busy."

And what can happen is all of a sudden we're looking at everybody else and we're thinking about everybody else. "Why did they raise their hands? Did they want to get attention? Are they sincere?"

### ***Hot Hostility to Cold Indifference***

This word "hate," it's interesting. It has a whole range of meaning. It can mean hot hostility or cold indifference. It can mean that you want to kill somebody or you just want to critique somebody. That's where he says, "If you don't love your brother and you hate them, you're guilty of murder." And all we're talking about is degrees. See, someone who hates is in the same category as someone who murders. The only difference is the murderer has acted on their hate, whereas the other person is trying to constrain it or let it leak in less obvious ways.

So when you come here today, Mars Hill Church, particularly those of you who are Christians, what's in your heart toward your brothers and sisters? Are you bitter? Is there somebody you just won't forgive? Now you'll say, "I can't forgive," but what you mean is "I won't forgive." Are you jealous? You're single, they're married. You're married, they're single. You're jealous. That was funny. You're infertile and they have kids. You see them coming up for Communion holding their baby and the whole time, you're not rejoicing with those who are rejoicing. You're coveting those who are blessed.

You go to Community Group and they say, "I got a promotion." And you say, "I'm still unemployed." And rather than rejoicing with them and them mourning with you, and the Bible says to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn, you become jealous. You become covetous.

Are you a critic? This tends to be my default mode for the range of hating. I become the guy with the critical eye. "That's wrong. That was off. Missed it. Failure." It's not loving. It's not encouraging. It's discouraging.

Are you the person who is a consumer? It's not that you hate people and want to kill them. It's just that you don't care about people and you want to use them. So you're always trying to figure out, "How can I grow my influence? How can I grow my business? How can I grow my bottom line? What can you do for me?" You even walk into the church with a critic's attitude, "This is wrong. This is wrong. This is wrong. I need this. I didn't get that. Please give me this. My family needs this. We would like to leave now because God forbid we get to know one another because then we might have to love one another."

And I know even when I started this sermon, some of you, because you're wounded, narcissistic, self-absorbed, you'll say, "Yes, that is true. We should love one another. And here's a list of people who have not loved me, and here's a list of ways I have not been loved. It's about time. I've been looking forward to this sermon." Let me submit to you, that's not the big idea. We don't sit you on a throne so that we can all gather around, sing your praises and meet your needs. His name is Jesus. The throne's already taken.

We're to love one another. What that means is Jesus loves us, we love one another. And the question is not to be always asking, "Why am I not loved? Why am I not loved well? Why am I not loved by my brothers and sisters? There's so much hypocrisy in the church." And I would say, yes. And it starts with the person you have a meeting with in the mirror every morning. And Jesus talks a lot about plank/speck. "You didn't love me." And they're thinking, "Wow, now we have something in common. You have not loved me either."

He says, "Be like Abel, not like Cain." Here's how you know that your heart is inclining toward Cain, it's how you speak of people. What do you say? Words, texts, emails, Facebook, Twitter, what comes out? And, how do you respond to success and failure in someone else's life? If they succeed, are you disappointed, angry, frustrated, seething? Then you hate them.

If they fail, does it actually give you a sick sense of joy? "Oh, they got dumped. Oh, good to know." Then you realize, "Uh-oh, that—I'll definitely be praying for them." So you throw a

little fake in there. “Oh, really, they lost their job? That’s good to know—I mean, nice to know—I mean, sad.” When someone succeeds, does that bother you? When someone fails, does that embolden you? If so, you hate them. You hate them. And that can be, again, from cool indifference, “I don’t want anything to do with them,” to hot hostility, “I want to hurt them.”

What’s in your heart today? See, because some of you walked in with a Bible in your hand, but jealousy in your heart. Some of you walked in with an offering in your hand, but bitterness in your heart. Some of you walked in with a spouse in your hand, but criticism in your heart. Some of you walked in with a child in your hand, but consumerism in your heart. And you’re thinking about other people more than the Lord and you’re here to compare yourself to them, rather than enjoy yourself with him. And God looks, not just at what comes in our hands, but what also comes in our hearts.

And some of you, you fake it so well. The indication here is of Cain and Abel that this had been their practice for a while, at this point, they’re not young men. This had been a long season, maybe decades of their life. They had been working and then bringing their firstfruits to the Lord. Some you, it’s like that. You’ve been in church for a while. You’ve been under teaching for a while. You’ve been in community for a while, but God knows your heart. God knows your heart.

And what happens with the first brothers is Cain kills Abel. Abel was innocent, didn’t deserve it. Some of you, the people you’re angry against, the people you’re jealous of, the people you’re embittered against, they didn’t do anything to you. They don’t have sin to repent of. The real problem is your jealousy. It’s your bitterness. It’s your covetousness. It’s your consumerism. It’s your criticism. It’s your idolatry. It’s your me-ism. Abel didn’t do anything. Cain just hated him. All Abel did was worship the Lord and that frustrated Cain.

Now at this point, if we leave it on these two big ideas, we don’t even need to be Christians necessarily. What I’ve told you is: do love one another; don’t hate one another. Okay? Muslims would say, “We agree.” Mormons would say, “We agree.” Atheists would say, “We agree.”

And then John makes sure that it’s all about Jesus and he tells us, not just the what, but the who and the how and the why. And he moves to the real big idea that Jesus loves us. So he starts by talking about our love for one another and then we realize, quite frankly, that we’re more like Cain than Abel. And then he talks about Jesus as the greater and perfect Abel.

## **JESUS LOVES US**

So let me say this, in the next chapter, chapter 4, he’s going to give two big ideas that I want to use to connect here with 1 John 3:16. He says, first of all, that God is love. So let me say this, God is love. And God defines love and God reveals love at the cross of Jesus. That’s where he’s going.

Number two, he says it this way, “And it’s not that we loved God, but that God loved us first.” And he sent Jesus to be the propitiation for our sins. The substitute, the one who dies in our place for our sins, the one who endures the wrath of God for our Cain-like tendencies, so that we can become more like Abel. Every time you think of the love of God, think of the cross of Jesus Christ.

That’s where the Bible always goes, because we have such a proclivity, such a propensity to misdefine love. Boyfriend and girlfriend living and sleeping together, going to move in together. Why? Well, it’s because they’re in love. No, they’re not! No, they’re not. Because rebellion against God is not the source of love. Using someone is not loving someone.

People are married, and they commit adultery and run off with someone else and, they make it sound like it was inevitable gravity. “We fell out of love, and then we fell into love with someone else.” No, you didn’t. You rebelled against the living God. You betrayed your covenant oath. You did not choose love. You chose to hate them. You chose to hate them. And you chose to declare war on the God who loves you.

God, when he gives us commands, they’re for our good. It’s like a mom who tells the kids, “The stove is hot. Don’t touch it. Watch out for sharp things in high places.” And the kid says, “You’re restricting my freedom.” “No, I’m preserving your life.” See, God’s a good Dad, and if we know that he loves us, then we accept that his commands are for our good. If we don’t know that he loves us, then we think that his commands are bad and we become rebellious kids, to our own destruction.

And the cross of Jesus is the demonstration, the revelation, the application of the love of God. That’s why it says it in John 3:16, right? “For God so loved the world he sent his only begotten Son Jesus.” That’s why he says it in Romans. “God demonstrates his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Again, 1 John 4. It’s not that we loved God, but that God loved us, and he sent Jesus to be the propitiation for our sins.

In 1 John 3:16, “By this we know love.” Let me say this, apart from Jesus, no one knows love. Apart from Jesus’ cross, no one sees love. “That he laid down his life for us.” That’s love. Love gives, it doesn’t take. Love serves, it doesn’t seek to be served. Love cares for the well being of the other above their own well being. Jesus Christ is the love of God among us. Jesus’ death on the cross is the demonstration of God’s affection.

Let me explain the cross of Jesus to you. It was the most horrific, public, shameful way to die. Roman citizens weren’t executed, only outlaws, rebels, those who were convicted of the highest of crimes. Jesus’ crime was claiming to be God, which was actually him just telling the truth.

They would crucify someone openly, publicly, shamefully. This is like state-sponsored terrorism. This is like when they take someone held captive and behead them on the Internet. It’s a way of causing terror to come upon the masses. “Don’t believe what this person believed. Don’t behave the way this person behaved.” Jesus was crucified openly, publicly, shamefully in front of his own mother and a mob.

Why did he die? Well, the wage for sin is death. Jesus never sinned. Why did he die? He died as a substitute. He died in our place. He died for our sins. Jesus’ death on the cross is the demonstration of God’s affection. If you ever wonder if God loves you, just remember, Jesus died for you and he gave his firstfruits because, friends, just like Abel brought his first and best, so Jesus is God’s first and best.

And there’s nothing that you and I treasure above our life. That’s why whatever your possessions, whatever wealth you’ve accrued, if your life was on the line, you’d trade it all in that you might live because our most valued possession is our life. Jesus gave his life. He gave his righteousness. He gave himself as a gift. And he didn’t do it for a bunch of Abels. He did it for a bunch of Cains.

So when we read the story of Cain and Abel, you need to understand that the whole Bible is about Jesus. That's why in John 5 they come to Jesus and they argue, he says, "You don't understand the Bible. It's all about me." The end of Luke's gospel, twice he teaches, opens up the Old Testament and shows how it's all about him.

The story of Cain and Abel is ultimately a story about us and Jesus. And when we read the story of Cain and Abel, be very careful, those of you who are religious, moral, devout, not to read it and say, "Yes, I'm like Abel and they've treated me like Cain." Read it and say, "I'm like Cain and I've treated Jesus like Abel." Then we really appreciate the love of God. Amen?

You say, "What? God loves me as an enemy?" Yes, again, it's not that we loved God first, but that God loved us first. It's not that you pursued God, but that God pursued you. It wasn't that you were lovely, but that God loved you. Now here's what this means, it's all of pure grace, undeserved, unmerited affection and favor from Jesus.

Now, what this does, this delivers us from this horrendous pendulum where—and how many of you haven't felt this? And let's just be honest. When you do good, you feel closer to God and holier, like God loves you more because you did a good job. And then when you fail, oh, you feel further from God. You feel that God doesn't love you as much. So then you try hard and you do good and now you feel close to God and he loves you again. Oh, but then you failed and now he doesn't love you as much.

What that leads to is this almost bipolar emotional life of pride and despair. "I did a good job. You love me right? I did a bad job. I wish you loved me like you used to." The truth is if he loved you before you loved him, if he loved you before you were good, if he loved you as a rebel, if he loved you as a Cain, he can't love you any more and he won't love you any less. Do you believe that?

If you believe that, like John, your identity will be transformed. I work from the love of God, not for the love of God. I'm able to stop using people to get them to like or love me and start serving people because Jesus loves them and Jesus loves me and Jesus loves us.

Most of you from church backgrounds, you don't get this and you were ruled and dominated by guilt and morality and shame. Ultimately, the most powerful, noble motivation is love, is love. God can't love you any more than the cross of Jesus, and God won't love you any less because of the cross of Jesus. The love is established.

Now God's love not only forgives your sin, it changes you so that you receive God's love and you love God and you love one another. Because of Jesus and his love, he died, he rose, he's alive and well and the source of love is available to all of the children of God.

### ***Jesus Is the Perfect Abel***

So looking at the story of Cain and Abel, like Abel, Jesus worked an honest job. Abel was a herdsman. Jesus was a carpenter. Like Abel, Jesus worshiped blamelessly. Jesus' whole life was one of worship and of bringing his first and best to the Father, and he was a pure-hearted worshiper. What he brought in his heart and his hands was pleasing unto the Lord like Abel. As I said, like Abel, Jesus gave his firstfruits. Abel brought the first and best of his most treasured possession. And Jesus is the Father's first and best, that God sent his Son, firstborn, first and best.

Additionally, like Abel, Jesus experienced jealousy. As he taught, people were jealous of his skills. As crowds thronged to him and adored him, there were those who were jealous of his success. As he demonstrated supernatural power casting out demons, there were those who were jealous of his spiritual authority.

As many loved him, many hated him. As many rejoiced in him, many cursed at him. Some shouted, "Hosanna." Others shouted, "Crucify." Like Abel, Jesus' brothers were jealous of him. Like Abel, Jesus was murdered by his brothers. Just as Cain killed Abel, so those who professed to be sons of God murdered the Son of God.

But unlike Abel, because Jesus is a better Abel, Jesus is a perfect Abel. Abel remained dead and Jesus rose from death to conquer death, to forgive sin and to turn Cains into Abels. So friends, if you're not a Christian and you come here and you're wondering, "What do I do?" Here's the answer, it's about what Jesus has done.

Jesus lived the life that was blameless. Jesus paid the price that was priceless. Jesus died the death that was required and Jesus rises to love you first before you love him, to pursue you, before you pursue him. And his love doesn't just excuse your sin, it forgives it. And his love does not permit your sin to continue, it permits you to walk away from it and to change, a bit at a time until you see him face-to-face and you're perfect in his presence forever.

Before we really appreciate Jesus' love, we need to accept that we start as Cain. And the fact that he would love his murderer, well, that's love. See, truly, friends, we are Cain. We've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. When Jesus died in our place for our sins, his blood is on our hands and we're as guilty as Cain. But because of Jesus, the better Abel, there is the potential through faith in Christ, to be a worshiper like Abel, to come to the Lord with an acceptable offering in our hand and an acceptable offering in our heart, not so that God would love us but because he already has through the death, burial, resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen?

And all of a sudden, the motivation for the Christian life is not guilt, but gladness, is not duty, but delight, is not seeking to make God love you, but celebrating the fact that he already has in Jesus.

## **CHRISTIAN LOVE IS PRACTICAL**

And then he closes with his final big idea. Christian love is practical. He says it this way. "And we—" So here's the big idea. Jesus, then us. Jesus loves, then we love. Jesus serves, then we serve. Jesus gives, then we give. It starts with Jesus. He changes us so that we can become more like him.

"And we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." Now let me say this, very rarely will any of you have an opportunity to die for somebody. But he's saying, "Yes, even at that point, your most treasured possession of your life, be willing to sacrifice to give that for the well being of another."

Some of you are soldiers, God bless you. Police officers, God bless you. Firefighters, God bless you. You will put yourself in harm's way. You may die for someone else to live. The recent rampage and shooting in the movie theater, it was reported that multiple boyfriends threw their body over their girlfriend and took the bullets to spare her life. Okay? Whether or not they knew the Lord Jesus, they were created by him and so they're working out of the image and likeness of God doing what a man is to do, and that's to love and protect.

Very rarely, though, will we get an opportunity to die for someone to demonstrate that affection for fellow members of the church. But he's saying even if it should escalate to that point, yes, we should be willing to give the gift of our life as Jesus gave his life for us. But since most of us will not have an opportunity to give our life in death, we need to give our life in living.

So he continues, "But if anyone has the world's goods—" So let me just ask you this, what do you have? What do you have? Just think about it for a moment. Let's say, for example, everything in your possession got stolen and for the insurance you had to write a list. They said, "Okay, just write a list of everything you own." We can't even remember it all, right? There's so much, we can't remember it. We're richly blessed people. Some of us, richly, richly blessed.

But he's saying, "You look at your possessions and what you have." This would include your home, your food, your income, your portfolio, your vehicle, whatever you've got. Your collective, aggregate wealth, all your stuff. He says, "Look at your stuff and ask this question, if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how can God's love abide in him?"

Now, what he's talking about here is that love is exceedingly practical, okay? Those of you who are more theologians, you're just going to want to do "nerds gone wild now," okay? As soon as we get to love in the Bible you're like, "Oh, there's *phileo*, there's *agape*, there's *eros*. There are different Greek words for love." That's not loving, right? You've already bored us. We don't feel loved at all, okay? "Well, C. S. Lewis wrote—" I know C. S. Lewis wrote a book on—and here's the big idea. There are different words for love. They're not always used consistently. It's never that clean. It's a lot easier to study Greek words about love. It's a lot easier to write books about love, or read about love, or speculate about love than to love, because people are annoying. And we're selfish. And those two variables make loving hard. And love is really practical.

Love keeps its eyes open and it looks for need. See, some of you are very loving. You're looking for needs. "Oh, I think need to be prayed for. I think they need encouragement. Somebody needs to talk to that guy." You're looking for a need.

What he's saying is there are other people who hate. They hate their church. They hate brothers and sisters in Christ and they close their eyes. Why are you not praying? "I don't see any needs." Why are you not serving? "I don't see any needs." Why are you not giving? "I don't see any needs." It's because you've closed your eyes. You've closed your eyes.

You're not looking because you hate them. Some of you say, "I don't hate them." Again, the word means cold indifference to hot hostility and maybe you're hating them through cold indifference. You're closing your eyes. I mean, there are people that have been coming to this church for years. You know what they do? Nothing. You know where they serve? Nowhere. You know what they've given? Nothing. And if you ask them does Jesus love you, "Yes, he does!" Do you love one another? "Yes, I do!" Would it hold up in court? No it wouldn't, because there's no evidence and you've closed your eyes.

Now what happens is a pastor will get up and he'll try to guilt you. "Look at all that Jesus did. Can't you do more?" And the answer is always yes. "Like, Jesus is God who died for me, yes, I could do more. You're always gonna win that one, pastor, yes. I've not given as much as the second member of the Trinity. Thank you for pointing that out, Captain Obvious. That's super helpful. Now I feel horrible." Instead of guilt, I want it to be, for you, an opportunity of gladness.

Let me ask you this, if you love somebody, are you looking for ways to help them, serve them, care for them? Mom, is that how it is, Mom? Say, "Oop, they need something to drink. Oop, that's sharp. Oop, they need me to encourage them. Oop, they fell down. They're crying. They need me to hold them." You see, what a mom does, she's always looking. "Where am I needed? How can I help?" Same with a dad, right? If he really loves his kids, he's trying to figure out how to help.

Same with a husband and wife, if they really love each other, they're attentive to the details. They're attentive to the details. So when they sit down for dinner, Mom knows what Dad likes to drink, and Dad knows that Mom's had a long day. And they've already figured out what the little needs are, unspoken and they're attentive to the details. That's love. Love is attentive to the details, amen?

How many of you single ladies, first date, if that guy just talks about himself, tells you what he wants, and gives you sort of a job description and doesn't ask you any questions, and isn't attentive to the details, and he's not observant enough to know that he is gonna send you to Jesus, death by boredom, right? You realize, this is probably not gonna be a good fifty-year run, right? Because he's not paying attention. He's not attentive to the details.

But the guy who shows up and says, "I brought your favorite flowers." "Oh, you knew?" "Yeah, I asked your friend." "Mmm, okay, we're off to a good start." "And I picked this restaurant because your other friend said that this is your favorite restaurant." "Oh." And all of a sudden, he's got a few things put together. What you realize is, "I think he loves me or at least he wants to. And he's attentive to the details because he values me."

## ***Open Your Eyes***

When we're talking about loving people, it's like that in the church. It's coming with our eyes open. Some of you, this means showing up early so you can greet those who are new because new people tend to come early and they feel very awkward. Right? It's like the first day of school. You're the only one in the school. You're like, "I'm early. It's very awkward. I just didn't want to be late, now I'm awkward."

That's why some of you don't want to get into Community Group. You're like, "If I get into Community Group, someone's going to have a prayer request and then I'm going to have to pray for them. If I pray for them, then God's gonna open my heart and eyes and then I'm gonna need to serve them. And then if I serve them, that's gonna be a total inconvenience, so I'm staying home."

Love keeps its eyes open. And when your eyes are open, you know what happens? Your mouth opens. So what he says is, "Let us not love just in word," but he's not saying absent of word. When our eyes are open, our mouth opens and what we do is we pray for them. We encourage them. And sometimes we rebuke them. It's saying, "I do want to help you, but you need to understand, you're not a victim. It's a self-inflicted gunshot wound," right?

You really don't have a—like, you didn't look for a job, but you did get a credit card. You didn't read the return address. They're all directly shipped from hell. You overlooked the obvious. You racked it all up and, you know, you were hoping that you'd find a boyfriend with a good job who could pay it off, you know, by April. And, you know, apparently he didn't show up. And, you know, this wasn't a plan. This was a kamikaze mission. And now, "Yes, you know, it's very dramatic and I love you and I want to help you, but the truth is

some things need to change.”

See, when your eyes open, your mouth opens. How many of you, you say, “I was gonna talk to that person, but I don’t want to get involved”? That’s hating them.

When you’re eyes open, your wallet opens. “Okay, I’m gonna help. Here are some groceries. You’re a single mom who needs a car, I have an extra car. I used to have an extra car. Now I loan it or give it to the single mom. Dad walked out and the kids are poor and now mom’s doing double duty, and that family’s upside down and they’re in our church, that’s something I gotta figure out how to help.”

Galatians 6:10 says it this way, “Let us do good for all people, but especially or firstly for the household of faith.” See, I’m a dad. I got five kids and it would be a horrendous thing if I said, “I’m going to feed all the kids,” and then mine were hungry. Feed your kids first. Feed all the kids, but feed your kids first.

And what can happen is for some of us, our eyes open up or our wallet opens up or our schedule opens up and it’s beyond the church because somebody brought a need to us and we saw it. I want you to see the needs at Mars Hill Church. I want you to see the needs for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For those of you who are particularly wealthy and affluent, I want you to really hear this. He says, “If you see somebody in need,” what he’s talking about is you getting to know them and getting involved with them because you know what’s harder than writing a check is writing a check and having a relationship. And sometimes the big donors, they want to write checks, but keep their hands clean, other than the ink.

And you got to get your hands dirty. You got to get to know people, serve people, love people. And the more you see, the more you will say life-giving words. The more you will give generously. The more you will serve faithfully. See, most of you, your problem has nothing to do with your schedule. It has nothing to do with your budget. It has everything to do with your eyes. You’ve closed them. You’re not looking for needs to be met. And so those needs go unmet. Open your eyes. “Holy Spirit, show me the needs.”

Let me ask you this question, who has God already placed in front of you? And don’t think, “Well, I pay taxes. It’s the government’s job.” That’s worldly thinking. Or, “It’s a church, the church will figure it out. There’s an org chart and somewhere on it is someone that’s supposed to be nice to people. I’m confident they’re in there somewhere.” Okay? That’s you.

If you’re a Christian and this is your church, God wants you to open your eyes, it’s an act of repentance, to start looking for needs so that it will open your mouth to pray for and bless others. It will open your wallet and your possessions and your fridge to give, to help others. And it will open your schedule to be inconvenienced to invest in others. That’s exactly what he’s talking about.

This is really different than, “I pulled up to a light and a guy with a sign made me feel guilty so I rolled down the window and gave him \$10 because I don’t know him and I’m not loving him. In fact, I may be hating him and enabling him in a lifestyle of addiction and destruction, but I feel better while I drive away.” Love does what’s best for someone. Love gives what’s best for someone.

And you know what’s interesting statistically? Who do you think gives a higher percentage of their income, the wealthy or the poor? Statistically in Christian churches, the poor give a significant higher percentage of their income than the rich. Why? They see the need. Because poor people know poor people and rich people know rich people. And rich people close their eyes to poor people. And poor people have to keep their eyes open to poor people because that’s all they got. And so poor people tend to have their hearts and their wallets and their schedules open to where they give more than rich people. Why? Because their eyes are open.

Now let me say this in conclusion. This is for your joy. It’s for your joy. See, when we receive God’s love and God’s love changes us and we love God and we go from Cain to a little bit of Abel, and then we start to love one another, what that produces in us is a profound joy because the Bible says it’s more blessed to what than what? “To give than receive.”

You know what that means? The happiest person is Jesus Christ. No one has given more than Jesus and no one has the degree of joy that Jesus has. As we give, we get the joy of the Lord. We do. So when we give, it’s to God’s glory, it’s to others’ good, and it’s our joy. Parents, on Christmas, your favorite thing, opening your presents or watching the kids or grandkids open theirs? Enough said.

Father God, please send the Holy Spirit to open our eyes first to the love of Jesus. Second, to our sin nature as Cain. Third, to Jesus’ love in spite of who we are and what we do. Fourth, that Jesus’ love turns Cains into Abels. Fifth, that loving you means loving one another, not because we want you to love us, but because through the cross, you already have. Amen.

*Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.*