

1 John 3:11-4:6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 1 John chapter 3 verse 11 to chapter 4 verse 6. 1 John chapter 4 verse 11.

1 John chapter 5 verse 11. Now he continues, expressing the opposition between the righteous and the wicked in terms of the contrast between Cain and Abel. Verse 11 connects with what has gone beforehand, with its reference to lack of love for one's brother as a sign of being a child of the devil.

[2 : 5 0] Once again, as he has done at several points already in the epistle, he recalls the teaching of Christ concerning love for the brethren. In John chapter 13 verses 34 to 35.

1 John 15 verse 12. 1 John 15 verse 12.

1 John 15 verse 12. 1 John 15 verse 12. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. In the contrast between Cain and Abel that he proceeds to draw, John is continuing to draw upon the teaching of Jesus recorded in his gospel.

2 John chapter 8 verse 44. The devil was a murderer from the beginning, and Cain was of him.

The motivation for Cain's murder of Abel was the fundamental hostility between the righteous and the wicked. Cain's deeds were evil, and Abel's were righteous. Abel's sacrifice was accepted, while Cain's was rejected.

[4 : 0 5] Cain was angry to be rejected, seemingly regarding his sacrifice as a means of getting his way with God, rather than as a genuine offering. The wicked hate the righteous because the deeds of the righteous reveal the true character of their deeds, and their character.

The wicked don't merely kill the righteous because they are spurred by their own wickedness, but because they are implacably hostile to those who do good. By contrasting love for each other with murdering our brothers, we might perhaps think that John is grossly exaggerating for rhetorical impact.

However, we should here recall Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5 verses 21 to 24. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go.

First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Just as Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount, John traces murder back to its roots in the heart, showing that it springs up from hatred towards one's brother.

God does the same thing in Genesis chapter 4 when he challenges Cain before his anger, envy and hatred towards Abel has borne the fruit of his act of murder. In verses 6 and 7 of that chapter, The Lord said to Cain, Recognising the deep hostility that the wicked feel towards the righteous, John's hearers should not be at all surprised that they are experiencing the hatred of the world.

[6 : 03] The example of Cain and Abel served to suggest that the enmity of the wicked towards the righteous has been there from the very beginning. This is not a new thing, and Christians should not be surprised to face it.

When they experience it, they should know that they stand in the long history of enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. None of us start off in the realm of life. We must pass out of death into life, and assurance that this has occurred is experienced as we live and act in love towards the brothers.

This love is the fruit of the transition, and it is also in this practice that we are assured that the transition has taken place. The assurance is not necessarily known as we stand back and look at our works, but rather as we live in love towards God and our brothers.

We can often think of assurance as if it were strong knowledge of an objective truth, rather than as knowledge of a relational reality, which is not caught in the objective-subjective opposition that many approaches to assurance are.

You do not know that you have a loving relationship with someone generally by standing back and scrutinising your heart, nor by abstracting yourself from the relationship and examining its objective character in a detached manner.

[7 : 18] Rather, you best know that you have a loving and healthy relationship with them, as you live in loving communion with them. The same is true of our relationship with God. Assurance is a knowledge that is largely gained indirectly, as we live in love towards God and our neighbour.

The person who does not love has not made the transition from life to death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer. He may not yet have killed his brother, but the sin of murder, the seed of his father the devil, has taken deep root in his heart.

The true pattern of love is provided by Christ himself. As Jesus teaches his disciples in John chapter 15 verse 12, This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. Paul spoke of Christ's love as the fullest expression of love, back in Romans chapter 5 verses 6 to 8.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly, for one will scarcely die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die.

[8 : 24] But God shows his love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We must follow this pattern of love in the way that we treat our brothers. The contrast here is a pronounced one.

On the one hand, there is the taking of the life of our brother, whether in the ultimate act of murder, or in all the little multiple lesser ways that we assault them, undermining their relationships, their property, their reputations, or the way in which we live in envy towards them.

On the other hand, there is laying down our life for our brother, whether in the ultimate sacrifice, or in the many ways in which, in love, we privilege their concerns over our own.

True love is necessarily evidenced in deeds. For instance, if we see our brother in need, and we have what he requires for his assistance, but we still do nothing, we lack any evidence for the love of God dwelling in us.

Like James, John wants his hearers to be in no doubt that love is not merely a matter of fine words, it must be embodied in deeds of love. When we have assurance, we will be able to approach God with confidence in prayer.

[9 : 30] There will, however, be times when we feel our hearts condemn us, and John wants us to know how to respond well when this occurs. Particularly for those who suffer with scrupulosity, with an obsessive conscience that constantly accuses them of various infractions, it is very important to find some way to set their hearts and their minds at rest.

We have limited knowledge of our own hearts, and we should be wary of placing too much weight on their judgments. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4, verses 3-5, But with me, it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you, or by any human court.

In fact, I do not even judge myself, for I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness, and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

Then each one will receive his commendation from God. We should not allow the accusations of our weak consciences to prevent us from approaching God. Rather, we should seek the forgiveness that he has promised, and commit ourselves to the way of love, finding assurance as we are taken out of ourselves and into relationship with the God who is so much greater than our accusing hearts, a God to whom we can confidently entrust ourselves.

Where we do have confidence before God, we will find that our prayers will be much more effective. As we are conformed to the character of Christ, our prayers will also be conformed to God's will, and we will receive surprising answers.

[11 : 02] If we constantly hesitate in approaching God with the accusations of conscience, we will be stunted in our growth, and John wants us to avoid this. But if we press our accusing consciences notwithstanding into ever more committed appeal to God our Father, the more we do this, the more our hearts will be set at rest, and the more that our prayers will be effective.

In his farewell discourse in John's Gospel, Jesus had taught his disciples about love for each other as his commandment to them. This commandment is the one new commandment, personally embodied in Christ himself, which sums up all of the other commandments.

Keeping this one command not only sums up, but also includes all of the other commandments. In keeping this commandment, we will keep all of the others. In verse 24, he moves from the singular commandment to the plural commandments, perhaps to underline this relationship between plurality and singularity.

This is how we are to abide in Christ. Once again, this is reminiscent of John chapter 15, verses 9 to 14. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.

Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

[12 : 21] This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you.

How do we know that God abides in us? By the spirit that he has given us, the spirit that Jesus promised to his disciples in the farewell discourse. Once again, we should not presume this to mean that we know that he abides in us by being able to point directly to the spirit in our lives and say, there, God dwells in me.

No, the spirit blows where he wishes, although we see his effects. The assurance comes through the spirit's work within us. The spirit will lead us to call out to God as Father.

The spirit will lead us to love our brothers. The spirit will produce in us a spirit of prayer. The spirit will lead us to long for God's promised future. We almost certainly won't be able to point to the spirit doing this in our lives, but the effect in our lives will be such that we will be assured of our fellowship with God.

As he works in us, this confidence will be a result. Love, assurance and discernment have all been important themes in John's epistle to this point, and the theme of discernment, previously discussed in chapter 2, verses 18 to 27, reappears in chapter 4, verses 1 to 6.

[13 : 41] The spirit grants us love, but the spirit also grants us discernment. In chapter 2, verses 20 to 21, but you have been anointed by the Holy One and you all have knowledge.

I write to you not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it and because no lie is of the truth. And in verses 26 and 27 of that chapter, I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you, but the anointing that you receive from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you.

But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him. Love and discernment belong together.

Looking back at John's teaching about love, it should be clear that it is also teaching about discernment, about recognizing what belongs to the truth and to God through the criterion of love, as that in which all the commandments in their particularity are consummated.

Jesus had warned his disciples about false prophets back in the Olivet Discourse, in Matthew chapter 24, verses 9 to 13. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake.

[14 : 54] And then many will fall away, and betray one another, and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold, but the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Just as there had been false prophets in the last days of Judah, so there would be false prophets in the days before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The faithful needed to be prepared, and to be able to discern between what was true and what was false.

Lying spirits had gone forth. People were sent strong delusion, and were believing lies because they hated the truth. A key test would be found in the knowledge that the true Spirit of God bore witness to Christ.

As Jesus had taught in John chapter 15, verse 26, But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.

The truth of Christ, as the incarnate Son and Messiah, was a powerful touchstone for testing and identifying spirits, and recognizing the true Spirit of God.

[16 : 02] False spirits do not bear witness to Christ, but to some other thing that will usurp his place. If we want to be able to discern the true Spirit of God, testimony to Christ is the watermark.

In contrast to the true Spirit's testimony, the testimony of false prophets was inspired by the world, and heard by the world. The true people of God, however, would be known in the fact that they hear their Lord's word, as he had taught, in John chapter 10, verses 2-5.

But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. A question to consider.

