

Perhaps the most beloved and oft-quoted verse in all of the Bible are those meaningful words, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Every time we read or hear John 3:16 it reminds us of the vast love God demonstrated to his creation. Did Nicodemus realize when he first heard those words, or did John realize when he first wrote them what an impact they would have on mankind two thousand years later?

No matter how long we meditate on the greatness of God’s love for us, it still fills us with wonder. His love is intense and infinite. It descended to our level and raised us up to His. Oh that we might know the breadth, length, depth and height of His love! The Apostle Paul’s desire for the Ephesian believers was that they might know the love of Christ even though it was beyond knowing.

Will we ever understand the love that is described in this verse? I believe the key to comprehending St. John 3:16 is found in the *other* John 3:16. Elder John offers some commentary on the subject of God’s love in his first epistle. He writes, “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” In other words, this is the way we understand God’s love—to demonstrate our love for others.

John begins this analysis of God’s love in verse 11 when he writes:

*For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous. Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you. We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.*

The beloved disciple warns us (vv. 11-15) to be filled with brotherly love lest we be like a murderer. There are unhealthy emotions and attitudes than can kill our compassion for one another. Consider some of the murderers of brotherly love.

*Envy* was a primary factor in the murder of Cain’s brother. Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice than his brother and when they were alone together Cain slew him. Envy also nearly claimed the life of Joseph, but his brothers sold him instead (Acts 7:9). Solomon said that envy could be even more destructive than anger and wrath (Proverbs 27:4) Even Pontius Pilate recognized that Jesus was delivered because of the chief priests’ envy (Mark 15:10). A spirit of jealousy will always destroy a spirit of charity.

Another murderer of brotherly love is *Ambition*. In Judges 9, Abimilech murdered seventy of his brothers to assure his position as leader of Israel. Athaliah destroyed her own grandchildren to claim the throne for herself (2 Kings 11). Diotrophes is not the last person to hinder the work of godly brothers because of his own need for honor (3 John 9-10). Ambition still claims the life of the brotherhood today.

As *Vengeance* motivated Absalom to take the life of Amnon, so it has cost countless saints their relationship to their Father and King (2 Samuel 13). As instruments of cruelty, Levi and Simeon destroyed the city of Shechem (Genesis 34). Joab refused to let the war-time death of his brother go un-avenged even in the time of peace (2 Samuel 3). When we

refuse to heed Jesus' teaching to turn the other cheek, we will be consumed by a spirit that claims the life of our strongest power. Peter taught us that we have been called to give blessing for the evil that has been done to us, and that in so doing we will receive God's blessing (1 Peter 3:9).

Perhaps when John offers his commentary on the key to understanding God's love, he remembered the words of Christ in John 15:12-13. "This is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." We are to give our lives for one another.

Jesus' words two chapters earlier are very similar. "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." Notice that he did not say that the defining characteristic of Christ's followers is perfection. Neither is it holiness. As well, it is not even morality. The power of our witness is found in brotherly love.

We have been called to love one another in the manner in which Christ loves us. This is how we understand God's love for us, by living out that love with others. The exhortation is to love in deed. How easy it is to shake a hand or hug a neck and say, "I love you," after a church service when we have felt the presence of God. How much more necessary to love in deed! The Apostle James speaks of the emptiness of a faith that lacks works. "If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, 'Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled;' notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?" This was John's interpretation of God's love for us. If we are able to meet the needs of our brother and we fail to do so, we do not have the genuine love of God.

To love like Christ has loved us, we must also forgive like he has forgiven us. In Matthew 18, Jesus told of the parable of a servant who was forgiven a great debt and yet refused to forgive the smaller debt of his fellow-servant. When Paul defines charity for the Corinthian believers, he declares that love does not count the number of times we have been wronged. How often should I forgive my brother? Jesus answer to Peter was that it is absurd to keep count.

My religion without love is of no value (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). As we have opportunity, let us do good unto all men especially them that are of the household of faith. Our love for God is most often displayed in the way we treat our fellow-man.