

1 John 3:9–24 and Loving One Another

Prayer

Introductory Questions

- What makes it so difficult, at times, to obey God’s command to love one another?
- What are examples of how we should express our love for one another (such as forgiving one another)? In other words, how should we relate to one another?

Introduction

1 John 3:9–24 focuses on the biblical command for Christians to love one another. While the Bible teaches that we should love all people (not simply fellow Christians), this lesson addresses loving our brothers and sisters in Christ—those in the family of faith.

The biblical concept of love for others involves *affection that both desires and acts for their best interest*. There is a beautiful progression in Scripture that helps us understand how we come to love God and others:¹

- God is love, and it radiates from him. His devoted affection is part of his very being (1 John 4:8), and it expresses itself eternally toward Jesus (John 17:24).
- God expresses his love for people in a variety of ways: (1) meeting humanity’s physical needs (including the righteous and the unrighteous) (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17), (2) choosing his people for a personal relationship with himself before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4–5), (3) sending Jesus to die for our sins (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 1 John 3:16), and (4) outlining his will for our lives in Scripture (Ps. 119:124–125).
- We receive his love. Once we recognize God’s loving offer of eternal life through Jesus, we honor God and the gift he offers by trusting in Jesus (Num. 14:19; Gal. 2:16, 20). For all who are Christians, “God’s love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom. 5:5).
- We are then able to love God and love others by the power of the Holy Spirit—the overflow of God’s love in our lives (Matt. 22:37–40; 1 John 4:7–12, 19). Put simply, “we love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

We organize 1 John 3:9–24 into three main sections: (1) Two Paths (vv. 9–15), (2) The Ultimate Example of Love (vv. 16–18), and (3) Assurance from God (vv. 19–24). We conclude this lesson by providing examples of how we can love one another.

¹ Two works significantly shaped my thinking here: Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* and Morgan, “How Does the Trinity’s Love Shape Our Love for One Another?” in *The Love of God* (ed. by Morgan).

1. Two Paths: God the Father, Love, and Life OR The Devil, Hatred, and Death

- “9 Everyone who has been born of God does not sin, because his seed remains in him; he is not able to sin, because he has been born of God. 10 This is how God’s children and the devil’s children become obvious. Whoever does not do what is right is not of God, especially the one who does not love his brother or sister.” (1 John 3:9–10)
- “11 For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another, 12 unlike Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother’s were righteous.” (1 John 3:11–12)
- “13 Do not be surprised, brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers and sisters. The one who does not love remains in death. 15 Everyone who hates his brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.” (1 John 3:13–15)

Each of these three passages outline two main realities or paths for our lives. *In verses 9–10*, there are two fathers. Either we have been born (again) of God the Father and do not continue in our consistent patterns of sin, or we are children of the devil and do not do what is right, such as loving believers. *In verses 11–12*, there are two character traits. Either we love one another, or we feel hatred and commit evil deeds. *In verses 13–15*, there are two spiritual states. Either we have inherited eternal life (evidenced by our love for believers), or we remain in a state of spiritual death and separation from God (evidenced by our hatred for believers) (Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 193). “Loving one another” ties these passages together (vv. 10, 11, 14).

There are not ultimately three separate choices, as if we could choose, for example, (a) to align ourselves with God the Father, (b) to persistently hate others, and (c) to receive eternal life. There are only two paths: we are God’s the Father’s children, choose love, and experience eternal life OR we are the devil’s children, choose hatred, and remain in a state of spiritual death. Based on these realities, the world will either hate us or love us (v. 13; John 15:19).

- What is hatred? How does it express itself (subtly or otherwise) in our lives?
- How would you define *the world* in verse 13? What does it mean that the world *hates believers* but *loves its own* (John 15:19)? Examples of each?

2. The Ultimate Example of Love: Christ’s Love for Us, Expressed at the Cross

16 This is how we have come to know love: He laid down his life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 If anyone has this world’s goods and sees a fellow believer in need but withholds compassion from him—how does God’s love reside in him? 18 Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth. (1 John 3:16–18)

We come to know the nature of true love by reflecting on the ultimate example of love: Jesus laying his life down for us (v. 16). Instead of hating our brothers and sisters in Christ (v. 15), we should follow Jesus's example and lay our lives down for one another (v. 16). How so? By using our possessions, for example, to help fellow believers in need. Whoever "withholds compassion" (literally in the Greek: closes his inner parts) and assistance demonstrates that "God's love" (either God's love for us and/or our love for God) does not reside in them (v. 17; 4:19–20). We should not merely love in word and speech, but also in action and in accordance with God's truth (v. 18). But we must always remember that Jesus's death is so much more than a mere example for us to follow. *Jesus's death atoned for our sins*—for all who trust in him—something our love for others could obviously never do (2:1–2).

- In what ways was Jesus going to the cross such a profound act of love?
- What is an example of someone in need for whom you could show love?

3. Assurance from God: Focusing on God and Keeping His Commands

19 This is how we will know that we belong to the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20 whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows all things. 21 Dear friends, if our hearts don't condemn us, we have confidence before God 22 and receive whatever we ask from him because we keep his commands and do what is pleasing in his sight. 23 Now this is his command: that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another as he commanded us. 24 The one who keeps his commands remains in him, and he in him. And the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit he has given us. (1 John 3:19–24)

When our hearts condemn us because of our sins against God, how can we know that we belong to the truth and receive assurance before God (vv. 19–20)? We must focus on God, for he is greater than our self-condemning hearts and he knows all things, including the power of the cross (v. 20). When we look to God and love others, our hearts will not condemn us, and we will have confidence before him (v. 21). Obeying God and doing what pleases him produces confidence before God in prayer, and we will receive whatever we ask from him in accordance with his will (v. 22). God's commands are not complex: trust in the name of God's Son and love one another (v. 23). Obeying Jesus is how we remain in him and how he remains in us (v. 24). We know that Jesus remains in us by the Spirit of God he gives us (v. 24).

- How would you counsel someone who doubted their salvation?
- What bold prayer requests *for yourself* do you want to bring before God?

Sound Doctrine: Loving One Another

We cannot offer God's love to others if we have not personally received God's loving gift of eternal life through Jesus. And it is challenging to love others if we do not consistently allow others to express their love for us. (Receiving love from others often exposes our pride!) Christian love is the overflow of love that we receive—ultimately from God, but also from others. With that in mind, how do we express our love for fellow believers in concrete ways?

1. **Pray for One Another.** You don't need to be in someone's presence to love them (Eph. 6:18–20; James 5:16). What could be more loving than crying out to God that he would help them to love and obey God with all their hearts? Prayer is one of the greatest acts of love that we can offer others, and each of us needs to be loved in this way!
2. **Greet One Another.** Jesus has already welcomed believers into his family (Rom. 15:7), and when we see him face to face, he will greet us with and invite us into *his eternal joy* (Matt. 25:21, 23; Jude 24). In a like manner, we should greet one another with a sense of joy, gratitude, and expectancy regarding how God will move in our midst (1 Pet. 5:14).
3. **Open Our Hearts, Eyes, and Ears toward One Another.** While each of us has needs, Christians consistently desire to love *others* and give to *others*. They do not overprioritize this question: "What's in it for me?" To serve and care for others requires a willingness to look and listen closely to determine how we can best minister to others (Gal. 5:13).
4. **Meet One Another's Material Needs.** Addressing one another's material needs (by providing, for example, food, clothing, shelter, money for special needs) is not the only way we love others. But doing so expresses God's love in concrete ways and often leads to opportunities to care for people spiritually (1 John 3:16–18).
5. **Bear One Another's Spiritual Burdens.** Most Christians are either hurting (whether it manifests itself in anxiety, sadness, despair, or shame) and/or struggling to overcome a particular sin. Christians help one another to bear those burdens (Gal. 6:1–2).
6. **Forgive One Another.** Forgiving someone for a wrong does not mean that the pain immediately goes away or that trust is restored. Forgiveness is a commitment to not get even, to treat others with love despite being harmed (Col. 3:12–14). We should commit ourselves to "forgiving one another, just as God also forgave [us] in Christ" (Eph. 4:32).
7. **Teach, Encourage, Exhort, and Warn One Another with God's Word.** God speaks through his Word, not only as we read it ourselves, but also as we share it with one another (1 Thess. 4:18; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). God expresses his love for us by teaching us his Word (Ps. 119:124), so helping others to understand and apply God's word is a great gift indeed.

- What questions or comments do you have about this lesson?
- Identify and explain one or more ways that you plan to love a fellow believer in your Christian community.

Prayer