

COMMUNITY

2

THE FOUNDATIONS OF COMMUNITY: LOVING ONE ANOTHER

1 John 3:11–18; 4:7–12

By Beth Crawford

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

John 13:34–35

“The historical manifestation of God’s love for us in Christ not only assures us of his love for us, but lays upon us the obligation to love one another. No-one who has been to the cross and seen God’s immeasurable and unmerited love displayed there can go back to a life of selfishness.”

John R. W. Stott

“The love of God displayed in His people is the strongest apologetic that God has in the world.”

F. F. Bruce

AIM OF THE STUDY

- To understand that Christian community is built on Jesus' command to love one another in the way He has loved us.

KEY VERSES

"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."

1 John 3:16

PREPARATION

Read over the notes on "**How to Teach the Bible in Small Group**" and "**Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion**" in Vineyard Church of Columbus' *Small Group Leadership Training Manual*. Before you read over the Scripture, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then read through the passage and the Bible study below. **You will need to go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you could eliminate if your time is limited.** Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (*). Rather than leaving these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture's truths and applying them to their own lives. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. The authors are supplying this for the leaders' benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to provide resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for study.

OPENERS

A man in our church had fought the after-effects of excessive radiation treatments for the past twelve years. During that time, some of his difficulties included: needing regular intravenous feedings of liquid nutrients and ten hospital admissions—each lasting a month or more. In spite of this, he and his wife happily adopted two boys. Church members rallied and prayed for his healing during numerous health crises. His wife relied both on family who lived nearby and the couple's church family when her husband grew seriously ill.

She said one of the biggest helps she received was when people baby-sat her children. These offers freed her up to visit her husband in the hospital. As her husband's health declined in the months before his death, church friends brought meals to the family, prayed for her husband and even fasted before meeting to pray together about the situation. The

family did not have life insurance, because her husband's long-term illness had made him uninsurable. After the husband's death, church members gave sacrificially so that she was able to cover funeral and burial expenses. She even had a small amount of money left to live on during the next year. She later learned that one couple, which didn't have any extra cash to give, returned an already-wrapped Christmas present so that they could donate ten dollars.

While no one's efforts could make up for the loss of her husband and the boys' father, these individuals showed deep care for this family. During the first year after his death, the widow was often ill, too. Her relatives and a single woman from the church sacrificed time and energy to care for the very active younger son. This single mom said many in the church showed them kindness, asked how they were doing, prayed for them, etc. A man with a strong business background volunteered to manage the boys' finances free of charge. A few other men spent regular time with the older son, doing things such as building models, participating in outdoor activities and even taking him shopping so he would have a gift to give on Mother's Day. The older son crafted a clock in school to present to one of the men on Father's Day to show his gratitude for the relationship they had developed. Several youth leaders in the church spent time mentoring her younger son as he reached his adolescent years, taking him bowling, to movies, or just out for a meal to talk with him and provide male companionship.

The people in her church small groups have also given a great deal of support. The second year after her husband's death, she joined a wonderful home group. The leaders set a tone of caring for one another, and included this single mom and her boys in many activities. During camping trips, some of the group would set up her tent prior to her arrival. Men spent time informally asking about how the family was doing, and ministered to her and the other women in the group with great sensitivity. God used this group, especially the men, to bring a great deal of healing to this widow. Also, the leader's wife would occasionally ask to take the two-year-old son for the day, giving the mother time to regroup and get some housework completed.

Three times when the family moved, small-group members offered tremendous assistance. They surprised her by paying for the rental truck several times. When they moved her belongings, they remained at the new house to set up the beds and put sheets and covers on them. The women would help her unpack and arrange her kitchen, too. She said that she could not have moved without the groups' efforts.

This widow states, "I was very needy for a couple of years, but after being so effectively ministered to, there came a time when I was able to give back to the Christian community. Ecclesiastes says that there is time for everything under the sun, and for me, there was a time to humble myself and receive, and then there was a time to give back what I had received. Also, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:3–4 that we can comfort others with the same comfort that God has comforted us with. I now find a lot of happiness and satisfaction in helping others come closer to Jesus."

This woman's story is a good example of what Jesus meant when He commanded His disciples to love one another (John 13:34–35). He was talking about the sacrificial giving

of time, money, talents, and energy. Christians from the local church demonstrated the love of Jesus in significant ways that greatly impacted one family's life. Now, she is able to help others when they face trials of various kinds. Her support and empathy also helps strengthen the church community to the glory of God.

When we use the term "Christian community," we mean the following:

Christian community is people united by a common calling from God; a common salvation in union with Jesus Christ; a common experience of the indwelling, transforming, and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit; and a common mission to advance God's Kingdom. These people live out their lives together, mutually supporting each other in love and depending upon the Holy Spirit (Nathan and Crawford).

Pray and invite the Holy Spirit to come and teach you through this study.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This is background information for leaders. You may decide how much to share with your group members. Because this is the second study on First John, you may be able to skip most of this unless you have people present this week who did not participate last time.

1 John

Unlike most of the letters in the New Testament, the author is never identified in the letter. The book is named "First John" because it is traditionally attributed to the apostle John, the brother of James and one of Jesus' three closest disciples. He may have been a disciple of John the Baptist before meeting Jesus, and therefore one of the first to follow Jesus (John 1:35–39). *First John* shares many characteristics with *The Gospel of John*, so most scholars believe the apostle wrote both. This letter may have been written around 60–90 A.D. (Marshall, p. 1096) and is mentioned by others sometime before 200 A.D. (Stott, p. 18).

While *First John* is included in the three "letters" or "epistles" of the apostle John, it might be more accurate to think of this "...as a written sermon" (Marshall, p. 1092). John is writing to correct some problems caused by false teachers who had divided the church and prompted some to leave (2:19). Some scholars think that the apostle is writing to Christians who are fighting two errors: one cult viewed Jesus as less than fully God and the other saw Him as God but not truly man. If Jesus was a mere mortal and not God, then either He lied to others or was self-deceived. We could not worship and follow a liar or a madman (Lewis, p. 56). On the other hand, if Jesus was Spirit but not fully human, then the historical facts of Jesus' bodily death and resurrection could not be true (Dunn, p.7). In this case, the foundation of our salvation, Jesus' blood sacrifice in our place, would not exist or be effective. With both groups in mind, John's goal is to draw the majority back to the foundational truths of the gospel so that there won't be division in the church. Thus throughout this letter, the apostle will refer to truth or light which leads to obedience, lies or darkness which leads to sin, and tests to know if we belong to God and His people or not.

John states several basic truths about God's character: "God is **light**" (1:5) and "God is **love**" (4:8, 16). "The knowledge of God will therefore produce holiness resembling His and acts of love resembling His" (Bruce, p. 56). The language in the book is very simple. The words are short and most of the phrases are straightforward. However, these simple words contain rich meaning when we consider what they refer to. The challenge with John's writing is not "syntax" (What does it **say**?) but "semantics" (What does it **mean**?), (Ebert and Crawford, *Foundations: Walking*).

STUDY THE PASSAGE: 1 John 3:11–18 and 1 John 4:7–12

- 1. Let's read two short sections in *First John*, which talk about the role of love in Christian community: 1 John 3:11–18 and 1 John 4:7–12.**

In 1 John 3:11, what essential part of the Christian message does the apostle write about?

John reminds us that we should **love one another**. On Jesus' final night with His disciples, He commanded them to love each other the way He had loved them (John 13:34–35). This would testify to the world that they were Christ's followers, and would be a primary way to attract others to finding eternal life in Christ.

- 2. Who did John use to exemplify the hatred and evil we see in the world (vv. 12–15)?**

John exhorts the church members not to be like **Cain**, the son of Adam and Eve who murdered his brother, Abel (Genesis 4:8). Cain was jealous that God had accepted Cain's sacrifice but rejected his. God warned Cain before the murder that "...sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7). Genesis does not explain why God accepted Abel's sacrifice but rejected Cain's. However, Hebrews 11:4 says, "*By faith* Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain did..." [emphasis added by author]. John Stott writes that we can assume God had told the two what to do, and Abel obeyed God in faith, believing that he would be "righteous" or right with God, while Abel was willfully disobedient. Thus Cain showed his evil nature in disregarding God's words even prior to murdering his brother (Stott, p. 144).

John has just pointed out that the source of sin is the devil and those who habitually sin show that they are "of the devil" (1 John 3:8). John contrasts those who are still under the influence of the devil with those who are children of God by faith in Christ (1 John 2:28–3:10, as explained by John Stott, pp. 120–142). Those who are now born again do not have the nature of the devil but the nature of God in them, influencing them towards good (1 John 3:9). In the next chapter, John will write that those who are born again ought to love because the nature of God is love, and He now lives in them (1 John 4:7–11, 19).

Jesus taught that being angry with or condemning a "brother" will be judged as if one had committed murder (Matthew 5:21–22). This does not mean we should

never get angry. Anger is not necessarily ungodly since the Lord responds in anger to injustice, evil, sickness, and death (Isaiah 10:1–4; Matthew 4:10; Luke 3:5; John 11:33, 38). How we handle our anger is what determines whether we sin or not (Matthew 5:21–22; Ephesians 4:26–27). John links hatred with the way the world will treat Christ's followers, but reassures them that loving their brothers indicates that they have entered eternal life (vv. 13–14).

When John writes about love, he is not referring to the various feelings and indicators of human love, family bonds, or attraction. He is speaking about *agape*, the holy, unselfish love God displays in everything He does, especially in the giving of His Son (Stott, p. 146).

3. What positive example should we imitate (v. 16)?

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers” (v. 16). Jesus' self-sacrifice defines true love: acting in a way to benefit someone else. John says that Jesus' example is the one we should follow, not the selfishness that unsaved people display. John thinks it is incompatible for those redeemed by God's Son and born of God's Spirit to act selfishly (p. 140).

4. What concrete ways can we show love for other Christians (vv. 17–18)?

John uses an example of sharing our possessions with other Christians in need. He wants our relationship with God to be more than talk; we should express God's sacrificial love, which we have received in concrete ways. He reminds us that we have benefited from Christ's unselfish gift of His life to ransom ours. Therefore, we should be like Him by generously and freely sharing what we have with the rest of the Body of Christ. Of course there are many ways to implement this today: we could share our time, our talents, our resources which may be financial or material, our prayers, etc.

*What impact could our small group have if people saw us serving each other in practical ways?

Your group could easily brainstorm about this. Perhaps you will want to do so at the end of the study as an application of what you have learned.

5. Let's move on to 1 John 4:7–12 and read it aloud.

What does John remind us to do in verses 7, 11, and 12? Why should he have to remind Christians to act this way?

In these verses, John writes that we should “**love one another.**” In verse 7, he speaks to the believers as, “dear friends.” This probably indicates he is writing to those who remain in the churches but have seen division over doctrine. He urges them to join him (“let us”) in obeying the **command** to love other Christians. In verse

11, he says loving one another should be the **result** of God loving us through the sacrifice of His Son. In verse 12, John speaks hypothetically of the **impact** loving each other could have on the world: making God known and maturing in His love. Whether the Christians were disagreeing over major doctrinal issues or simply acting selfishly like the unsaved around them, John repeats the command of Jesus: “love one another” (John 13:34).

Christians need to be reminded to love each other because of our pride, our greed, our fears and other sinful patterns. We can fall prey to defending our understanding of the truth with such that we judge and speak against brothers and sisters in Christ. We may justify hoarding material resources claiming we are just being good stewards of what God has given us. We may grow callous to the needs of others out of self-protection if we become overwhelmed by the amount of their needs, or give up when we try to give out of our own limited resources. We may hide or withdraw from fellowship out of fear that we won't be accepted.

6. What is our source of sacrificial love (vv. 7–8)?

John says, “love comes **from God**” (v. 7) and “**God is love**” (v. 8). Verse 8 is one of the four key statements in the New Testament about the nature of God: God is “spirit” (John 4:24), God is “a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29), God is “light” (1 John 1:5), and God is “love” (1 John 4:8, all cited in Stott, p. 163). We need to keep these truths in balance with each other so that God's truth, justice, holiness, and love don't seem to cancel one another out. Instead, we should see that “‘all his activity is loving activity’ and that therefore ‘if he judges, He judges in love’” (Dodd, cited by Stott, p. 163).

Not only is God the one who sets the example, but God also **empowers** us to live unselfishly. When we are born again, His Holy Spirit comes to live in us (1 John 3:24; 4:13). This is the Spirit of Jesus who lived obediently to please His Heavenly Father and died obediently to save us from eternal punishment. Paul tells us that the fruit of the Spirit living in us is first of all “love...” and then many other attributes which Jesus displayed: “...joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...” (Galatians 2:22–23). We are not left on our own to produce unselfish love. We have the unselfish Son in us, and by faith in Him, we can also say “no” to the daily temptations of our flesh, our culture, and the devil.

7. How did God show His love for us (vv. 9–10)?

God **sent His Son**, His One and only Son (v. 9; John 1:14, 18; John 3:16), which means Jesus is God's unique Son (Stott, p. 165). Jesus came to be our perfect sacrifice so we could be forgiven, be born again, and live with Him forever, rather than face eternal punishment and death (Hebrews 9:11–15; 1 Peter 1:19). Because God took the initiative to rescue us through the death of His Son (1 John 4:10; Romans 5:6–8), we don't have to doubt God's love for us.

8. John repeats a point we discussed in our previous study on 1 John 1—2:2. What is an atoning sacrifice (4:10; 2:2)?

John explains that God loved us (John 3:16; Romans 5:8), so He **sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins** (1 John 2:2; 4:10; Romans 3:25). Because God loved us, He wanted to remove the sentence of death hanging over us due to our sin. He also wanted to destroy the barrier between us created by our sin and rebellion. An “atoning sacrifice” refers to the Jewish sacrificial system that symbolically dealt with human sin. Because God’s law demanded death for offending His holy nature, and because “the life of a creature is in the blood,” God permitted certain animals to substitute for humans (Leviticus 17:10–14). The animal’s death and spilt blood symbolized that the death penalty had been carried out. **Then the human was considered “forgiven” and restored to relationship with God and the faith community.**

Jesus had to die because “...it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4). The sacrifices offered year after year actually reminded God’s people that they were still sinning and still guilty (Hebrews 10:1–3). Therefore, a perfect sacrifice was all that could remove our guilt once and for all. Only a perfect human could truly substitute for us, and thus remove the sentence of death over the whole human race (Crawford, “Isaiah 53:10–11”).

9. Because of Christ’s death on our behalf, how should we act now (v. 11)?

Because Jesus died to sin, and we are joined to Him by faith, we should be free from having our selfish sin nature dominate our thoughts and actions (Romans 6:2–7). Since God has extravagantly loved us (1 John 3:1; 1 John 4:9–10), we should be free from the fear of rejection and free to love others. And, if we recognize that God has taken care of our greatest need, forgiveness for our sins against Him, then we should be free from worry about our other needs being met (Romans 8:32). Jesus taught His followers, that if they held to His truth, they would be His disciples and His truth would set them free (John 8:31). Thus, Christians who grasp the profound truth of God’s love in sending His Son should be the freest people in the world in terms of abandoning self-interest and loving others unselfishly.

***What do you believe prevents you from loving others more unselfishly? Have you ever felt someone didn’t deserve your love or was too unlovable for you to relate to? How did God help you overcome those judgments against them?**

Recall that we were totally undeserving of the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf (Romans 3:9–20; 5:6–8). Sometimes God allows us to be in relationship with difficult people so that we will not rely on our own capacity to love, but we will have to depend on His love to work through us. Those “messy” relationships often help us see our own sins—our impatience, our demanding our own way, our pride, our insecurity/fear of the opinions of others, etc. This in turn can lead us to see that we may be “difficult” for others to love, too! Hopefully we will repent, and approach others in our lives with greater humility and concern (Philippians 2:1–8).

10. What does John say will happen when we love each other the way Jesus has loved us (v. 12)?

John says, “if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete.” This is not a condition that we *must* love each other and *then* God will live in us. John means just the opposite. When we love each other unselfishly, our relationships will make God more **evident** to the world. God’s love in us will also **mature** as we practice it among ourselves or share it together with others (Stott, pp. 166–167).

***Who made God’s love seem real and attractive to you before you knew Jesus Christ?**

APPLICATION

***What concrete ways can we show love for one another (in this group)? How could we express God’s love for fellow (or sister) Christians in our church, our community, or other parts of the world?**

Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you on whom to focus as you pray for your group and prepare this study. Also ask your members for their suggestions. Try to stimulate creative thinking so that people are not just limited to giving money or cooking a meal [although both are very practical and helpful]. Perhaps someone needs extra hands painting a home or working in the yard. There may be specific skills that some group members can share with others such as sewing, tax preparing, or auto repairs. These could help individuals save money or obtain service for which they are unable to pay. You can encourage fun and deeper relationships as group members meet together and help each other, or serve someone in need outside your circle. Small groups in our church can work together through one of our church’s avenues of outreach and mercy by signing up with the staff members overseeing those ministries. Likewise, investigate and support our missionaries and their projects by contacting the missions’ pastor. Expect people to be stretched [and perhaps a bit “testy”] by demands on time, finances, and self-interest. But encourage them that in losing their lives for Jesus and others, they will find true life and joy.

***What might help our group mature in God’s love?**

***How has loving someone you first considered unworthy or unlovable changed you?
[Please don't share names or details that would embarrass anyone!]**

***How can we help each other love others more freely?**

WRAPPING IT UP

Our life as Christians begins when we receive Christ's sacrifice on our behalf to pay for our sins, and when we invite Jesus to live in us. God purposed this entire spiritual transaction for our benefit. He lovingly and sacrificially sent His beloved Son to die in our place. Jesus unselfishly gave up every privilege as God and endured hardships, rejection, ridicule, torture, and a painful death for us. This unmatched love, demonstrated by the Father and the Son, is the foundation of our new life in Christ and is the foundation of His Body, the church. All who belong to Jesus by faith are tied to each other by the indwelling of His Spirit, another gift God freely gave to accomplish His purposes in us. Since God's unselfish love is the power and motive for all that He has done, it should be the hallmark of every Christian group. As we express God's unconditional love for each other, we will grow in our appreciation for God's love and grow in our ability to give it away more freely. Let's commit ourselves to allow His Spirit to express this unfathomable love in a greater measure in our midst.

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