



## Selfless Love: The Base of Christian Community

**Bible verses:** 1 John 3:11-17

*For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should love one another, unlike Cain who belonged to the evil one and slaughtered his brother. Why did he slaughter him? Because his own works were evil, and those of his brother righteous. Do not be amazed, [then,] brothers, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers. Whoever does not love remains in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life remaining in him. The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him?*

Ask everyone in the group to have their Bibles with them. Ask one person to read the passage out loud. Encourage them to have their pens and to underline things that strike them, especially later in the Bible when you go through the key words and phrases. Also, encourage them to make notes.

After the reading of the passage is complete, explain the context.

### **Context**

As a reminder, “the Community of the Beloved Disciple” had been through a lot. When they first got together, they were in the area around Jerusalem. They were joined by a group that had been disciples of John the Baptist and enjoyed a new life, the Christian life. A life filled with joy, love, and excitement for the future. Then trouble started. The Jews who did not believe in Jesus began to persecute them for not following traditional Judaism. The Romans who occupied the area saw the community as a threat to their rule and they persecuted them. Most likely, these are the factors that caused them to leave the area and to go hundreds of miles away to modern-day Greece, where they could live in community with each other. But this did not stop their problems.

In Greece, they met opposition from the pagans. If that wasn’t enough, members of the community began to fight with each other and there was a deep division that happened between them. John is addressing what he sees to be the source of that division.

After explaining the context, ask someone to read the passage to the group again. When the reader has finished, go back through and highlight the key words and phrases found below.

### **Key Words and Phrases**

- *Cain*: Found in verse 12, the story of Cain is in Genesis 4:1-16. He was the first born of Adam and Eve and he also murdered his brother, Abel.
- *Evil*: Found in verse 12, the Greek word is “ponēra” (poh-NAY-rah). In verse 4, John uses the word “lawless,” which means actively doing “ponēra”, or “acting maliciously.”
- *Love*: Found in verses 11, 13, 16, and 17, the Greek word is from the verb “agapē” (ah-gah-PAY). Both “phila” and “agapē” are used in the New Testament. “Phila” is used to describe friendship or friend 55 times. “Agapē” is used to describe something deeper than friendship. Christian love is new and unique. Community is based in this love.
- *Lay down life*: Found in verse 16, the Greek phrase has at its root “psyche theinai” (SOO-keh THEE-neh). It literally means “to put one’s soul into a prostrate position.”
- *Means*: Found in verse 17, the Greek word is “bion” (BYE-on). It means “one’s livelihood.”

Now you may provide the following interpretation.

## Interpretation

As was seen at the beginning of the book in chapter 1, John is trying to bring the community back to the basics of the Christian life. These basics are not anything that John made up. Instead, he is reminding them of what Jesus himself did and what he taught. He begins this section of his letter by reminding them that loving each other goes back to the very words of Jesus.

It seems that the division that happened in the community reminds John of the story of Cain. This story is a cautionary tale of both what has happened and what could continue if things aren’t corrected. John confronts the community with Cain’s jealousy and with his being self-absorbed.

It can also be inferred that Cain’s anger is rooted in his strained relationship with God. Those outside the community are in a strained relationship with God or they have no regard for God whatsoever. Jealousy within the community causes division, and a disregard for God outside the community causes persecution.

John, however, provides his most detailed instruction for how to live within the community, and it is by having a spirit of selflessness. The community can only survive when the deepest manner of love is present. Friendship that is found outside the community isn’t strong enough.

He wants them to know that God has made an unbreakable bond with them. They are to make an unbreakable bond with each other. This bond happens when the members of the community are willing to have their souls, their life forces, and their egos lie down

flat for others in the community. If our souls lie down flat in front of each other, there is no room for Cain's jealousy.

Now you may lead a discussion using the following guide.

### **Application to Real Life**

- John is reminding his community, the "community of the Beloved Disciple," of the story of Cain, where jealousy caused him to kill his brother Abel. When have you seen jealousy ruin a friendship or a group dynamic?
- After reminding the community of Cain, he tells the community not to be surprised if the world hates them. Abel was had a good relationship with God. Do you ever think that you'll made fun of or ostracized because of your relationship with God?
- John could have described the community of disciples as friends by using the word "phila," but he went deeper than that with "agapē." Why do you think relationship with your church is supposed to be deeper than other friendships? Do you feel that you have that level of relationship with others at church?
- Is it ever hard to lay down your ego and to boost someone else up? How do you think you can lay down your soul for someone else?

### **Closing Prayer:**

Ask someone else to read the passage for a final time and then pray the following prayer.

My Father who loves me, I admit that I have a big ego. I can become almost obsessed with *my* personal situations and needs. I also can spend way too much time worrying about others' perceptions of me, wanting them to appreciate what I've done and making sure that I get credit for my accomplishments.

A healthy self-concept is important to have, but a prideful approach and arrogance are wrong. I know that I am special to you, but I need to keep my ego in check and I need your help. I also admit that at times I push others down to elevate myself or clamor to be in the spotlight. Forgive me, Lord. I want to see myself as you see me. Please keep me from arrogance and the obsession with *my* wants and needs. Give me a humble spirit, willing to lay down my life to you first and then to others. I ask this of you, through your Son, Jesus, and with the Holy Spirit. Amen.