

Love conquers all. Discuss.

We are all probably quite familiar with the story. It goes something like this Adam and Eve have these two sons, Cain and Abel. One day Cain and Abel are sacrificing stuff to God—products of their labour. Abel is into agriculture, looking after sheep, Cain is into horticulture looking after fields. They both make an offering to God.

It really doesn't quite seem fair. God rejects the offering made by Cain but accepts the one by Abel. The question is why?

For some reason, and we can only best guess that it's that God looked at their hearts and saw that the motivation behind Cain's offering was impure and selfish—perhaps he was trying to impress God or he saw the whole offering thing as a competition. Nevertheless, God sees Abel as being righteous. As being acceptable.

Which makes Cain absolutely furious. So much so that his jealousy becomes hatred. And he kills Abel. The first recorded murder.

It's a small story at the beginning of Genesis and it was written in part to show how sin escalated after the fall where Adam and Eve shared the forbidden fruit.

John is using it as an example of how the unrighteous can hate the righteous. I am sure that we all have experienced this to some extent.

Eric Barlow, that's not his real name. But I remember him. Standard four, Owairaka primary school. We were good mates until he turned on me. He was the only Christian friend I had at school, and he was a dirty little boy. And so was I. We used to tell dirty jokes to each other and it was absolutely hilarious. I was 8 years old. One day, I said some little smutty thing and he didn't laugh and instead he said, "I'm not going to talk like this anymore. I don't think it's ok to do this if I'm a Christian."

I felt so annoyed with him. *I* was the preachers son, *I* was the holy one, and he was telling me what it meant to be holy. What a bum! I was so angry that . . . well I couldn't do anything really. We just never talked again. I so wanted to beat him up. I accused him in my heart of being holier than thou. I wanted so much for him to

stumble and get in trouble. It never happened. Oooh he made me mad.

Eric Barlow, the self-righteous little so and so. My rage was made all the more significant because he had shown through his change in heart and lifestyle my own short comings.

I even called him a hypocrite because I knew what he was like really. Well I didn't want him to change, because that meant I had to. As with Cain, I despised the righteousness of my brother. I detested him.

It's one of the most common reasons that people give when they leave the church. It's full of hypocrites. And in one sense it is. But the hypocrisy isn't nearly as bad as they want it to be so that they can have an excuse.

Let's think about it in these terms.

We are people who believe that the bible is the truth. And we hold dearly to this truth. Thousands upon thousands of books have been written to try to comprehend this truth. And we are meant to apply this truth to our lives. One of the fundamental truths that we come across is the truth that John is talking about here. That we are to love one another.

His example is that we should lay our lives down for each other as Christ lay down his life for us.

That is a tall order but it is also so far removed from our own experience that we would quite easily say yes.

Who here would die for any one of the people sitting here tonight? It's a straight forward commitment because it's unlikely that we ever would need to.

And many of us would like to think that we would. And the inspiration that we draw from martyrs of the persecuted church would probably increase our resolve to die for another here because we would be dying perhaps for our faith. But there is a sense where we are never really able to comprehend the magnitude of decision until that point. It *is* an easy commitment to make. But John is not calling us to be martyrs, but to be ultimately selfless, and there is a huge difference between the two. We can think the world of Jesus because he is well, he's God! So to die for him is not so big a deal.

How about dying for the person you know is not that perfect? Would I have died for Eric Barlow? I wonder if we grade people. I wonder if we have this secret grading system that people slot into. It's so secret that we won't ever let it be known that it's there even

to ourselves. I wonder if we have high ideals about our commitment to each other, yet when the rubber meets the road, we may probably fold.

Jesus died for us though we don't deserve it, would we do the same for our brothers and sisters here tonight? But the entire point has not been made yet. Because the point is this.

Jesus died though we did not deserve this and we call this grace . . . there is the example. Love shows grace. Love let's people let you down. Love is a commitment not a feeling. I don't think that Jesus felt like dying on the cross. I don't think he felt like it because in the Garden of Gethsemane he was working through how he could cope with going through the harrowing ordeal of the next few days. Jesus was one hundred percent committed to us and get this, in spite of our imperfections and failings and inability to follow him.

Grace is the gift of Love to those who don't deserve it. Like me. John's challenge then is for us to love with grace. Commit to the issues of those around you. Sometimes all that keeps love there is choice. Not a popular thing to say, but I think it is fundamental. It's against the grain of the idea that people grow apart, but make no mistake people have a choice in that too.

But with regard to loving those around us we might easily admit: Ok Jesus, I'll die for my brother and my sisters in Christ. I can do that! So John moves on to the next challenge.

Who would sell all that they have and give it to the poor?

Perhaps that's overstating the case, after all Jesus was only speaking to one man when he said it. A rich young ruler. Let's visit that for a moment.

Mark 10.17.

We have a rich young man who seemed a little troubled came running up to Jesus and he said, genuinely wanting to know the answer.

"What do I need to do to get to heaven?" And Jesus looked at him kindly and said, "you know all the commandments. Don't kill anyone, don't have sex with someone who you are not married to, don't take what isn't yours, don't lie about anything, honour your parents."

The man replied to Jesus, "well that's all very well and good, I've never gone against any of that. But there's still something not quite right here. For some reason my conscience is pricked. I still can't sleep at night."

Jesus looked at him and said, “You lack one thing. I won’t tell you exactly what it is, but you should be able to work it out from here. Go sell everything you have and give it to the poor—don’t worry about it, I assure you that you will be richer in the life to come. And then once you’ve done that, then follow me.”

Those are huge words. And the man felt awful because in a brief moment Jesus had asked him to stop serving self and serve others.

Is the point that he was to distribute everything he had to the poor? No. though that was the pathway. The point was that his own interests were elevated above others. Here is our connection to that story. It’s not until you die to self that you can be raised in Christ.

And there is where our hypocrisy lies. Because it’s right in front of us. When John was writing his book he had a vision of a church that would be full of love. Unconditional love, gracious love.

And if it were so, if we had even grasped a small portion of this truth, do you think that we wouldn’t be bursting at the seams with people flocking in? Don’t you think that John had in mind a mega church on every corner that the entire world would be drawn to and look up to and see as shining the light of God’s love, kindness, morality and his goodness manifest in people? Do you not think that he was convinced that this was the hope for the world?

Not at all. John wasn’t so naïve. He was living in a time of horrendous persecution. He lived through the persecutions of the Roman Emperor Nero, who has the reputation of being one of the most brutal rulers of the Roman Empire. The story goes like this according to the Ancient Historian Tacitus:

John was writing his letters against a backdrop of this kind of persecution. He knew all too well that Christianity was not popular. Why do you think that he wrote about Cain and Abel? John knew first hand the cost of following Jesus as he had watched his fellow apostles being picked off one by one by those who hated Christians.

And we have to wonder then at the magnitude of the following statement from John.

Verses 23–24. These are life threatening words to the readers and hearers of this letter at his time. Often I think we treat them as optional extras and to be honest I know I do at times. In many respects I don’t think I have a clue how to get over myself and get on with loving God and loving people.

But at the heart of my faith which means so much to me is the hope that I can and will develop this love. I'm not someone who is a good example of this. My obedience to God's commands seems to be somewhat limited. I am a work in progress as I think we all are.

God is constantly challenging us as we battle between the desire to make ourselves better than we are, to protect ourselves from the often painful surgery of the Spirit because it's better the devil you know than the devil you don't . . . well that's what we can tell ourselves. And sometimes, having to actually let Jesus be a part of every aspect of our lives is really painful. It can seem embarrassing, it seems like we put so much on the line when we want to be God oriented with our friends (like Eric Barlow), or be God-oriented in our work, or with our sport's mates.

It hurts to tell your children that they won't be having the latest and greatest because you see it as shallow and hollow. It hurts to go against the flow and have people look down on you because you look "holier than thou" to them. But that's nothing compared to being burnt at the stake at some Roman ruler's dinner party. Let's get some perspective.

How can we challenge those around us if we don't challenge the those around us? How can we be a light when we are shining the same light as everyone else? Lighthouses are lonely places, but they are so very, very, very important.

And the key to understanding John is to recognise this. That loving God and loving people is worth the consequences. To love is greater than the pain.

Christ's example. Our inspiration.