

The Great Community of Love — 6

1 John 3:11-24

‘Sin is lawlessness.’ There is more to that statement than might at first sight appear:

In our POW Camp the sergeants ate together. We would sit around a table. Firstly we lined up for food with the men of other ranks, and then we sat together, though not always. For purposes of this story I will say we sat together day by day and knew each other quite well.

We would collect our portion of thin vegetable soup, a small amount of rice, and on our table there would be what we sometimes called ‘rice cakes’ and at other times ‘doovers’, the word derived from the French *hors d’oeuvre*. The cook would take a handful of cooked rice, squeeze it together, shape it a little and drop it into hot palm oil. Probably no two doovers were of the same size. We would look at the plate of them set before us, the ration being one for each of us. Our eyes, sharpened in sight by hunger, would immediately size up the largest, and the smallest. We always had a complicated moral problem, and I would like you, the reader, to give close attention to it.

The person who made the first choice would naturally wish to pick the largest doover. In principle, and I mean, in principle, he would be selfish in doing this. If he took the smallest doover, then he would be liked by all, so being liked was a form of self-gain, in principle. If he took the smallest because he feared the criticism of others, then that, too, was a self-saving act, in principle. If, as a reader who scorns this matter of choices, you are critical of what seems to be pettifogging reasoning, then let me refer you to our desperate condition, such as I have outlined under the heading above, ‘The Desperate State of the Starved, Weak and Worn Prisoners’. Read it, and try to put yourself into that fearful state.

As I would look each day at the size of those rice cakes, I sought as unobtrusively as possible to take the smallest cake, though my stomach cried out for the largest. I had begun to realise one significant fact; namely that I had had moral assets throughout the twelve months of my so-called spiritual pilgrimage or search for truth. These assets aided me to do what I thought was the right thing. The question, of whether law originated from Man or God, now came strongly to me. As I said, if law was from Man, then neither anarchy nor the principle of law would matter the slightest. If law was from God, then it mattered totally! According to my Christian training, law came from God, but I was questioning this. According to humanist thinking, law derived from human thinking and, for that matter, had no essential moral authority. If the latter claim were the case, then I had wasted eighteen months clinging to an outworn ethic.

What I knew was that my moral assets, power to make a choice contrary to common sense and the saving of my life, had by this point completely run out. I was determined to come to a conclusion: indeed I was driven to it. This very day I would have to make the choice which would determine my future behaviour in life. In my mind had been the statement of Christ, which continually confronted me, ‘Greater love has no Man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends’. Taking the smallest cake, and living in every situation by this principle, meant, in essence, that one was laying down one’s life for his friends. To take the largest cake and always act on this principle meant, in some sense, contributing to the death of one’s friends. Everything in my body and self-saving thinking rose up to save my life, in principle, by deliberately taking the largest rice cake.

I said silently as I sat with others at that table, ‘God, if You exist, then give me the moral power to take the smallest cake without seeking the men’s praise, or fearing their dislike, or myself wanting to be someone. If You do not give that power now, then I will not believe You have created the law. I will not believe in You’.

I know that God gave me the power to gladly take the smallest one, and not to regret having to do it. I knew, then, that He does exist and that in a very ordinary way one can lay down one’s life for one’s friends. I have since come to believe that no one can be an atheist, and I have also realised in my most dreadful moments of that year’s crisis of faith He must have been present.

In a couple of paragraphs I have described in an ordinary way the experience I had which resolved the matter of law for me, but then it was no ordinary experience. It was most powerful, most terrible, and yet most wonderful. Fifty-five years after the event I can still feel the wonderful relief that came to me, the high joy and the assurance that law is the central fact of creation. Without law, I saw, it is impossible to speak of love and other such things.¹

This long quote highlights the way that Geoff Bingham came to the awareness of the law, not as ‘the law of love’ over against other aspects of law, but as the law which is love because it is from God who is love.

The implications of this are immense. The essence of sin is not loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul mind and strength and so, as a consequence of suppressing the truth of God, of not loving our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus’ summary of the Law, the *torah* of Israel, in Mark 12:28-34, goes far beyond the bounds of Israel’s Law to the heart of all law, which is the law of God himself who is love.²

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’²⁹ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;”³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’³¹ The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’³² Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that “he is one, and besides him there is no other”;³³ and “to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,” and “to love one’s neighbor as oneself,” —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.’³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question. (Mark 12:28-34)

When a person does not love, he or she is suppressing the truth and can only do so in acts of unrighteousness. One dictionary defines ‘a labor of love’ as ‘a task done for pleasure, not reward’. But a task done for pleasure may be essentially self seeking. The desire to derive pleasure from a task can easily result in using others to meet that goal, and so not be ‘of love’ at all. The same can be said of theological precision or refusal to engage in acts of evil or condone them, and it can be said also of patient endurance. The verdict may still be: ‘I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first’ (Rev. 2:4). So John’s critique of the situation he is addressing was not based on defensive moralism but on the deep awareness of what is truly ontological. ‘[A]ll who do not do right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters’ (1 John 3:10).

For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.¹² We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous.¹³ Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you.¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death.¹⁵ All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them.¹⁶ We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought

¹ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Story of the Rice Cakes: The Search for Moral Sanity in a Prisoner of War Camp*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1999, pp. 18-21.

² I would summarise this by saying that Israel’s law, the *torah*, was the eternal law of God himself expressed in particular covenantal form for the purpose of salvation history.

to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? (1 John 3:11-17)

There can be no doubt that believers do sin, but what John is stressing is that sin can never be a valid part of creation, since it is always, that is, from the beginning, a denial of the truth of creation. There can be, therefore, no accommodation to sin, only to it's being taken away by the lamb of God.

The sin of not loving a brother or sister did not only afflict John's first readers. The whole of scripture is insistent that it is at this point that we see the corruption of humanity. 'The commandment that we have from him is that we must love our brothers and sisters also' (1 John 4:21). Thus Mark 12:28-34 above, also Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:17-18. We should note, too, that the dimensions of love for brothers and sisters did not stop with one's kith and kin either. Leviticus 19:34 insists that you love the person who is not of the family of Israel but who resides among you. When Jesus was asked who qualified as 'neighbor' he told the familiar story of the Good Samaritan, notably reversing the order, so that the one doing the loving was in fact the one who would normally have been regarded as an unlikely recipient.³ See also, Galatians 6:10:

So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

That this was the message from the beginning, from creation, is seen in the way Cain is presented as one clearly not 'born of God'. He murdered his brother, demonstrating his true paternity, namely that he was 'of [his] father the devil' who was 'a murderer from the beginning' (John 8:44).

John asks why Cain murdered his brother and says it was because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous' (1 John 3:12). The story in Genesis 4 contains much that fills this out. The first thing we notice is that both Cain *and* Abel were sons of Adam. Both needed cleansing from the sin inherited from their human father and both knew that, as evidenced by both offering sacrifices. In later Israel, both grain and animal sacrifices were valid offerings on occasions, so there was nothing intrinsically unacceptable in Cain's offering. What was unacceptable was Cain's lack of faith (Heb. 11:4). Also, the words of Genesis 4:7, 'If you [i.e. in that case Cain] do well, will you not be accepted?' may be translated as 'If you do well, is there not forgiveness?'⁴ Abel's righteousness (Heb. 11:4) was his acceptance by God as a result of his offering his sacrifice in faith that it would propitiate an otherwise angry God. Cain, on the other hand, offered his sacrifice with apparent care-less-ness. Here was suppression of the truth, which could only result in guilt ravaging his conscience to the point where the one whose presence exposed his guilt became a torment which must be removed. Murder was only a small extension of hatred (1 John 3:15). Of course, by this refusal of the grace extended to him, Cain revealed his paternity and the deep division that had come upon humanity (Gen. 3:15). Of course, John's purpose was not to heap accusations either on Cain or on those who had left the community, but rather to warn the readers not to be like Cain, whose dismissal of grace led to his descent into such evil as clearly identified him with the evil one.

Cain, as the first human murderer, represents the hostility, the enmity, of the world towards God and his children. The readers should not be surprised (they will

³ The antipathy between Jews and Samaritans was deeply rooted. A Jew would not even use the same cup as a Samaritan, see John 4:9.

⁴ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1, Word Publishing, Milton Keynes, 1987, p. 104f.

not be comfortable) when that hostility shows itself, when antichrists appear. Nor should they forget that the hatred is finally directed not against them but against Christ; it is anti-Christ. Jesus told the disciples:

If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. (John 15:18-19).

Those who hate are demonstrably ‘from the evil one’. ‘We’, on the other hand (John’s emphasis is on ‘we’), ‘know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another’ (1 John 3:14). Again, he confronts readers with the vastness of regeneration. Later he will urge them to go on in love (1 John 4:7), but at this point, and indeed up to the point, the stress has not been on the *ought* but on the *is*. There is an obligation to love, but here the point is that the readers, by virtue of regeneration, do love!⁵ Whereas once they were dead in trespasses and sins, and so truly dead to each others (see Gen. 3:7-12), now they do live in love (Rom. 5:5; Col. 1:8; 1 Thess. 4:9-10). What we do is clear evidence of what God has done. ‘Whoever does not love abides in death’, that is, death is where you were—and are.

The statement by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:21ff.) about being angry with a brother or sister does not explicitly say that hatred is murder, although Jesus had said, in the same overall context, that lust is adultery. However, John does say it. ‘All who hate a brother or sister are murderers.’ ‘Brother or sister’ in this context, while no doubt having reference to those around us, points back to the example of Cain. His hatred, his anti-love, became visible in the actual death of his brother, but the murder was inherent in the hatred. All that is needed is the removal of restraints for it to appear (see Mark 7:7-23).

How can one who hates have eternal life? It is simply a false claim for ‘you know that murderers do not have eternal life in them’ (1 John 3:15). By the example of Cain we know what anti-love is. Over against that we know what genuine love (see 2 Cor.6:6) is:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. (1 John 3:16)

Love is not theoretical. Theoretical love is not love at all. John’s point about practical love is similar to James 2:14-17 about practical faith. Love and faith if not expressed in action are not genuine. If God so loved that he gave, then how can we claim to love and, in the light of the needs of others, withhold, and still claim to be one with him? Whilst those who left the fellowship, and possibly left others in need, may have been culpable, that does not relieve the people of God of their responsibility to be like their Father.

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²²and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. ²³And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us. (1 John 3:17-24)

⁵ I think that is understood in 1 John 4:7 which we will examine later.

Let there be no talk *about* love; ‘let us love, not in word or speech, but in action and truth’. Love is actional, as it is with God’s love for us, and it is to be in truth, that is, ontological, flowing from and one with the being and nature of God and so one with the true nature of all things. As they used to say, ‘Get real!’ By that we will know that we are from the truth. And, when our hearts condemn us, we can reassure our hearts before him.

Plainly our hearts will condemn us at times. We may be distressed by the sin we see in our flesh. But do we see the fruit of his love in our lives? Of course we see failure, but do we see beyond that to the transforming work of God in us? That was Paul’s point in Romans 7:14ff. Hatred of sin is evidence of the coming of the new covenant into us, even though what we see is not the final arbiter. Wonderfully, ‘God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything’. He knows the truth of his own faithfulness and justice and so he knows that we are clean (1 John 1:7-10). Our assurance will come from an awareness, that is, from faith, that God himself has provided the propitiation which he demanded, and what we see of the fruit of the Spirit affirms that. What we see, of course, does not prove it, otherwise we would quickly move to either despair or to a foolish confidence in what we have achieved.

But what boldness we have before him if we know that, in the light of the cross of Christ, our hearts really do not condemn us. That means also that we will not shrink from asking him for those things we know to be consistent with his character and will, because we are obeying his commandments, doing what pleases him. It is a false humility that says that that is not possible, for it would be to call into question the work of God in us (see Ezek. 36:25-27). We cannot prove the work of God by what we see, but faith may see it, nonetheless.

Fundamentally, our obedience is the obedience of faith (cf. Rom. 1:5). All else flows from that. ‘To believe in the name of [God’s] Son Jesus Christ and love one another’ (1 John 3:23) summarises all there is. ‘That we should believe’ translates the Greek aorist tense which means that it refers to a particular point of time where we came to faith, the single action of believing in his name. But plainly one does not ‘believe’ and then stop. That single action of faith introduces the whole life of faith (cf. Rom. 8:4). And to believe in him is to do as he commanded, which means we should go on loving one another. And if we do that then we abide in him and he abides in us. That is simple. It is not a reward for loving, it is the way things are. And we know that, because the Spirit has been given to us. While John will go on and speak further on that in the next paragraph (1 John 4:1 ff.), suffice here to say that this final comment, ‘And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit he has given us’, is not just a theological truism. It was the conscious experience of the believers. (see 1 John 2:20; Acts 2:36; Gal. 3:2 etc.). They love principally because it is the Holy Spirit who is at work in them. Therefore, not only do they know that they abide in Christ but that he abides in them. It is Christ who poured out the Spirit; we thus abide in him and it is Christ who abides in us. So our assurance may be very rich and fulfilling.