

- e. John took this general description of love – laying down one’s life for the other – and provided his readers with a practical example in which one person’s need becomes known to a brother with the resource to meet it (3:17-18). This example is eminently appropriate, first because it pertains to an everyday situation that virtually everyone has experienced. But even more, it spotlights well the multi-faceted nature of love as *self-giving*: Love involves concern and compassion, but also discernment, availability, generosity, and sacrifice. It equally implicates a person’s perception, judgment, sentiment and action. So in the present example, the individual acts upon a need he’s personally aware of and concerned about (v. 17), but in a way that honors the truth (v.18).

It’s also important to note that, while some English versions place the emphasis on material goods (the “world’s goods”), John’s language is more encompassing. It includes material goods, but goes beyond them to encompass everything pertaining to life in this world. Many times people are in need of material provision, but there is another arena of need that is universal and ever-present. Whether a person has much or little of the world’s goods, everyone has the same inward needs associated with love and relationship. Even the wealthiest person can find his life devoid of genuine concern, care, acceptance and intimacy. In fact, wealth is a stumbling block to love and authentic relationships. This is the reason so many of the rich and famous find themselves drawn to the people they were close to when they were “nobodies.” Those are the only relationships they can trust to be real – relationships grounded in genuine interest, affection and concern.

When human needs are considered, physical needs (food, water, shelter, etc.) are typically put in the forefront. But human beings are divine image-bearers, so that their non-physical, uniquely human needs have a certain primacy. John recognized this, and so made the issue of meeting a brother’s need (whatever the need may be) a matter of *love*. He wasn’t so much concerned with supplying another’s material lack as having an *open heart* toward the brother in need.

- The noun here rendered *heart* literally refers to internal organs (hence the common KJV rendering, *bowels*), and so symbolizes one’s innermost self, including one’s deepest sentiments and emotions.
- More narrowly, it was associated in the Greco-Roman world with affection, love, mercy and compassion (cf. Luke 1:78; 2 Corinthians 6:12, 7:15; Philippians 1:8, 2:1; etc.).

John’s concern was that the saints bring an “open heart” – i.e., sincere and eager affection, concern, compassion and availability – to the circumstance of a brother’s need, whatever that need may be. John insisted that love *acts*, but he also recognized that actions are emptied of genuine goodness when they’re devoid of love. Actions must reflect and express an open heart of love. Thus God’s condemnation of Israel’s loveless worship and obedience (cf. Isaiah 1:1-14 and Zechariah 7:1-6 with Matthew 15:8; ref. also Corinthians 13:1-3).

Actions are to be expressions of love, and this occurs only when actions are informed and motivated by loving hearts. Especially in affluent cultures, material help – giving some *thing* – has little real cost (ref. Mark 12:41-44), and all the more so when it brings tax advantage and can be done at a distance. Writing a check to a charity is easy and it allows the giver to tell himself that he cares for others; actually getting one’s hands dirty and encumbering one’s heart with real people is a much more costly venture that relatively few are willing to take on. But it’s exactly this sort of personal involvement that John was calling for. The issue here isn’t giving *something*, but the open, eager giving of one’s *self* – one’s heart and so also one’s resource – to a brother in need. John’s concern was the authentic love that manifests itself in the truth of self-giving, not merely detached actions, affirmed ideals or sympathetic words (3:18; cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8).

This is the sort of love that defines God and characterizes His actions. He gives, not merely good things, but *Himself*, the Christ-event being His superlative act of self-giving; the God who is love has demonstrated His love for the world by giving Himself in His Son (cf. 3:16, 4:9-11; cf. also Zechariah 2-3; Hosea 1-3; Isaiah 40:1-11 with Matthew 3:1-17; also Luke 1:67-79; Romans 5:8). This same love defines the image-sons who share the Father’s nature and likeness, enabling John to ask the question, *how can those with shuttered hearts believe that the love of God abides in them* (3:17b)? There are three ways the phrase, “love of God,” can be understood, and all three have their proponents:

- 1) The first is that John was speaking of love *for* God. In this case, then, he was questioning how a person can claim to love God and not love his brother who is a fellow child of God (cf. 4:20).
- 2) The second is that John was speaking *descriptively* of the sort of love that characterizes God. Here, then, he was arguing that a heart closed against a brother is inconsistent with the sort of love that characterizes God. This view, too, has contextual support (ref. 3:16, also 4:9-11).
- 3) The last option is that John was referring to love as it has its *substance* and *origin* in God. In this view, John’s premise is that God’s love defines His children, so that the absence of this love argues against one’s sonship.

The third option also has strong contextual support, but perhaps the strongest argument for it is the fact that the first two options are actually subsets of it. First of all, the children’s love for God and one another has its basis in God’s love for them (cf. 4:16, 19). But it’s not simply that a person’s love for God and other people is grounded in God’s love for him; rather, the love that characterizes the children is the *same love* that defines and characterizes their Father; their love is the extension and expression of His love. Therefore, everyone who loves demonstrates that God abides in them and that they share in His nature (4:12). Conversely, the one who closes himself against his brother demonstrates that God’s love doesn’t abide in Him, and so neither does the God who is love.

The children are animated by the Father's love, so that their righteousness (authenticity) is found in their manifesting His love. Hence John's exhortation: "*Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth*" (3:18). Here he was both exhorting his spiritual children to an authentic love and recognizing the existence of a pseudo-love – a human counterfeit that people naturally confuse with love. John's expression has several elements of parallelism (word/tongue, deed/truth, and the relation between the two pairs of nouns) that have been variously understood. But the context suggests something like this: *Little children, let us renounce the false love of lofty ideals and detached rhetoric, and love with deeds that manifest the truth of love and the God who is love.*

John was making a crucially important point, but precisely because it is a point about *love* – love as it is true in God, his exhortation must be treated carefully and wisely. Specifically, it must be interpreted in the light of the larger scriptural instruction concerning love and the way it expresses itself. Without this defining framework, John's instruction is easily reduced to an emotional ethic of undiscerning sympathy and uncritical generosity. *But he was calling for love in action, not action that appears loving.* The starting point, then, is to understand what love is and how it operates. Two things are critical in this regard:

- The first has already been emphasized, which is that love is self-giving; it involves the giving, not of things per se, but of oneself. Love *acts*, but out of the conviction that the self and all of its supply are God-given, God-empowered resource for serving others.
- Secondly and most importantly, love is inseparable from and dependent upon discernment and wisdom; it rejoices in the truth (1 Corinthians 13:6). Love pursues good for the other, but that which is *truly* good as God understands good, and as He has revealed and illumined it in the Scriptures and through the leading of His Spirit.

Taken together, these truths show that love is both a way of *being* and *doing*; it defines the person as well as the conduct of the God who is love, and so also His children who possess His life and nature. *Love, then, is self-giving that purposefully pursues the true and greatest good of its object as informed by Christ's mind and impassioned by His heart.*

Love is discerning and disciplined as well as compassionate and caring. People can possess these qualities in some measure, but that doesn't mean they are capable of love. Love discerns the true and ultimate good of its object, which is not possible for those who are alienated from God because *He* is that good. Natural human love is a phenomenon of the realm of death; it operates according to that realm's principles and outcomes (Proverbs 14:12). Whatever its sincerity, apparent virtue and good fruit, natural love exists in contradistinction to the mind of God, and so works against the true good of the other (ref. Matthew 16:21-23; cf. also 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15; 1 Timothy 5:3-16).