

## 1 John 4 – Part I

### 1 John 4:11 – The Test of Love

**1Jn 4:11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.**

**1 John 4:11** is one of the great **truths** of Scripture, and because of that it becomes one of the great **tests** of Scripture. In some way, every truth of Scripture becomes a test as to whether or not the believer is going to both embrace it intellectually into their mind and then incorporate it practically into their life. Just by the very nature of what it says, this verse becomes a test of how a believer interprets their personal spirituality. What makes this verse so compelling is the utilization of the word “**ought**” which was studied earlier. It means to owe someone and to be under an obligation to them. In the New Testament letters it predominantly refers to the sense of moral responsibility that arises out of a person’s belonging to Christ. John has already dealt with this in **1 John 2:6** when he said,

**1Jn 2:6 He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.**

Belonging to Christ and claiming to be a part of His family creates moral obligations in the believer’s life. This is not something that can just be casually dismissed as not being pertinent or meaningful for the believer’s life. This is what it means to live out the Christian life. Without Christ making an impact on a person’s behavior, there can be no assurance. The Christian life cannot be viewed as something neutral to Christ. To the contrary, yielding and entrusting one’s life to Christ morally obligates that individual to walk as Christ walked. Unfortunately, this kind of mindset generally requires a major paradigm shift for the average Christian. For many people who claim to know Christ, He is not their life, but just a meager part of their life. No matter how someone defines Christianity, it cannot be a definition that embraces minimal allegiance and faithfulness to Jesus Christ as something acceptable or even genuine. That definition is nonexistent within the New Testament, but the modern church has so redefined biblical terms that it appears to have no understanding whatsoever of what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. Salvation is not something that is a mere alteration or a kind of minor renovation within a person’s life. To the contrary, the nature of salvation is transformational.

If someone goes to the gas station and fills up their gas tank with gas, then they are under an obligation to pay for that gas. So what this verse clearly states is that because God has truly loved the believer and demonstrated that love to them, then the believer is morally obligated to love other believers in the same way. It is important not to miss the compulsory and binding nature of this verse on a believer’s life. John is not providing this as some kind of option or alternative for the Christian life, but rather as a real spiritual test that validates the reality of the individual’s confession regarding Christ.

Many of the commentaries actually make the spiritual obligation a kind of personal preference for the believer. In other words, the believer understands through their own experience what Christ did for them personally, so they need to consider that they also “should love” in the same manner. However, that is not the intent of the word “**ought**” at all. The word does not mean “should”. It means to be bound and obligated to perform a particular duty. It is something that is owed.<sup>1</sup> The word refers to a **binding obligation and responsibility** that cannot be ignored because the individual simply does not feel like loving another believer. It is not that the individual “should love”, but that they are under an obligation to love. The word actually refers to a moral obligation that is derived from the believer’s relationship to God and to Christ.<sup>2</sup> For instance, believers owe worship to Christ and to God the Father. Husbands are

obligated to love their wives like Christ loved the church. Wives are obligated to honor and respect their husbands. I am sure that every godly husband or wife believes that their mate is fully obligated to be faithful to them because of their relationship. They are marriage partners, and in marriage the obligation is seen as critical for the relationship to have any meaning or substance. Parents are obligated to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Children are obligated to be obedient to the parents. Pastors are obligated to carefully study and teach God's Word. This is normal life, but when people are faced with demanding and challenging personal relations, faithfulness often times becomes preferential and optional – which it is not. In none of these examples is there an option for the individual not to do what God has clearly indicated that He wants them to do. That option is never provided.

Just assume that someone owns a business where they provide a service to people. When they provide that service to someone, the person receiving that service is fully obligated to pay for that service. When I go to get a haircut, I always take the right amount of cash with me to pay the individual who cuts my hair. When I get out of the chair, it would not be a good thing for me to say *“I have decided that I will not pay you for cutting my hair today. I know that I ‘should’ pay you, but I just do not want to pay today.”* Trust me, but that would not go over well in the barbershop. The moment that I sit in that chair and allow the barber to begin cutting my hair, I am fully obligated, responsible, and liable for the expenses that will be incurred. That is exactly what the word **“ought”** is saying - believers are fully obligated to love one another. This abiding principle is basic to the Christian life and to the effective operation of the local church.

If the two primary truths that John has provided in this letter could be condensed to a simple statement, it would be that true believers do not live in habitual sin and true believers genuinely love and demonstrate their love to other believers. Of all of the tests that John provides, this particular test is generally considered to be more revealing than the other tests relative to the true nature of a believer's outward confession of Christ. There comes a point in every believer's life where their confession has to be demonstrated in their life as proof of the reality of their confession. It is one thing to know the truth and to reflect on the truth, but invariably the truth has no value until it is actually incorporated into the believer's life. Believers have been given the truth so that it can be vitally integrated into their life, not just so that they can know something intellectually. In fact, stating this in somewhat of a negative way, for someone to know the truth, but not to integrate that truth into their life actually brings on their life a greater kind of spiritual judgment and discipline. What that discipline would be is very difficult to quantify, but to deny its reality in the believer's life would be utterly foolish. There must always be the visible demonstration, expression, and manifestation of what the believer claims to actually believe. Actually, it is spiritual hypocrisy for a believer to confess the truth verbally, but not to live that truth out in their life.

That which governs and controls the Christian life is called “truth”, and God's truth is something that has to be woven into the spiritual fabric of the believer's life. It has to be integrated and infused into the believer's life, into their lifestyle, their words, their actions, and how they think. God's desire is that the truth completely saturate the believer's life. If someone says that they truly believe something, then the only way for someone else to confirm that is by actually seeing that truth worked into their life on a consistent basis. A person's belief cannot be separated from their behavior. Unfortunately many Christians have not yet grasped the reality of that statement. For whatever reason, they seem to believe

that the truth and the outworking of that truth simply does not apply to them, but is something that they may or may not get around to based on their other priorities. They see things a different way. Generally, the way that this becomes evident in their life is when God allows another Christian who is somewhat problematic and difficult to actually cross paths with them. This happens all the time where two people simply cannot get along with one another. They have disagreements and different perspectives, and those differences create tension between them. So rather than demonstrating biblical and Christian love for one another, they either ignore each other or they bring their differences to a head without finding any kind of resolution to their issues. Sometimes, it is just a matter of personality differences where their personalities clash. However, if the truth were known, deep down neither one of them actually like the other person. Now, no matter what someone's personal justification or rationalization may be to this kind of behavior, it is completely unbiblical no matter who that individual is or what their importance may be in the local church.

This kind of perspective and ultimate behavior has no place in the Christian life. In fact, that is why this verse is a test. Every believer, no matter how spiritual they may think themselves to be, must take this "love" test relative to how they are going to respond to another believer who irritates them, annoys them, exasperates them, and often times may actually anger them. It is just a test. It is just a test to either expose or validate the reality of whether or not they understand this injunction in [1 John 4:11](#) that believers, all believers, are to love one another in the same way that God loves them. The believer has not been given the spiritual right to live and think how they want to live and think, and not to love if they do not want to love someone. In fact, everything that the Holy Spirit is doing in the believer's life is built around transforming how the believer thinks so that it can deeply impact their life in a way that glorifies Christ. Every time that a believer is faced with a difficult and aggravating circumstance with another believer, it is critical to their personal spiritual development that they immediately remind themselves of these kinds of truths. Love in action is a deeply mental and intellectual exercise in the believer's life. The believer may outwardly confirm that loving the difficult person is the right thing to do, but then never do it. Unfortunately, many believers are waiting until they have some kind of good, soft, personal "feeling" towards someone else that irritates them before they actually treat them the way that God wants them to respond. That is unbiblical and will not produce the outworking of God's love in their life. Truth is something that is applied, not felt. When as a father I told my children to do something, it did not matter to me how they actually felt about doing what I asked them to do. In fact, much of the time I knew that they most likely would not "feel" like doing it. Spiritually, the application of the truth in a believer's life is never about how they "feel" about doing what God indicates is the right thing to do. People's feelings are generally very fickle and quite often in contradiction to the Word of God. In fact, a person's feelings will generally be inclined to make them appear to be the good guy and the other person the bad guy. At that point, their feelings have removed them from obedience. Their feelings have convinced them that the other person is the one who needs to change. Once again, it is never about how a believer "feels", but rather are they willing to provide a biblical response in alignment with God's truth.

So, the goal of every believer has nothing to do with their feelings, but rather the implementation and incorporation of the truth into their life no matter how they may feel. In fact, having strong personal feelings against someone is the evidence that God has touched a very critical area in that believer's life

that He is going to develop. If someone simply does not “feel” like responding properly to another believer who is very difficult at times, then their problem is not with that person, but with God and His injunctions on their life. For whatever reason, they think that they can just ignore the issue. However, what they fail to understand is that God’s work in their life is always a matter of character development, and the more that they resist that work of God within them, the more that it reveals their lack of love for God Himself. This is no small issue. This is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. This is not something that a believer can just casually ignore, overlook, discount, or disregard in their life. This is the reality of how God develops His character in every believer, and if that individual does not recognize or accept this, it only reveals the shallowness and superficiality of their confession of Christ.

When a believer pawns off their spiritual responsibility before God, what that reveals is that the individual is actually very selfish. Selfishness involves being self-willed and self-loving to the exclusion of other people. The individual reaches a place where they operate from their feelings more than they obey the Word of God. This kind of self-love is very dangerous to a productive Christian life. The following attributes are a listing of how a person’s self-love is often manifested and demonstrated in their life: (1) self-centered, (2) self-asserting, (3) conceited, (4) self-indulgent, (5) self-pleasing, (6) self-seeking, (7) self-pity, (8) hyper sensitive, (9) self-defense, (10) self-sufficient, (11) self-conscious, and (12) self-righteous. That is not a good list, but it is a very accurate list of what selfishness produces in an individual’s life. The more selfish a person is, the more their life revolves around them and what they want, how they want to live, and what they want to say. Their personal priorities take precedent over everyone else and anything else. They see everyone else as the difficult person. The selfish and self-centered person is touchy, oversensitive, easily offended, and often very over reactionary to meaningless things.<sup>3</sup> If God had chosen to respond to the lost in the same way that we so often react to other people, no one would have been saved. Paul wrote the following in [Romans 15:1-3](#) and it also uses the same word “ought” that is in [1 John 4:11](#).

**Ro 15:1 We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves.<sup>2</sup> Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification.<sup>3</sup> For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "*The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.*"**

If Christ did not live for Himself, then certainly believers are not intended to live for themselves, but too often that is exactly what happens in a believer’s life. The Christian life is NEVER about personal self-gratification, but rather living life in a sacrificial way for other people, and especially other believers even though at times they may not seem too lovable. The fastest path to personal misery, disillusionment, disappointment, contempt sarcasm, and cynicism is to live a life of personal self-gratification. [Luke 17:33](#) is the classic verse on this issue.

**Lk 17:33 Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.**

The Greek word for “save” is “*peripoieo*” and is a word that means to acquire or purchase, to get for oneself.<sup>4</sup> It carries the idea that a person is going to save up so that they can keep it all for themselves. It is a word that means to have more than enough, to be rich and wealthy.<sup>5</sup> The AMP Bible and ESV actually uses the word “**preserve**”. It is the idea that when a person clutches and clings to life on their

terms and when all that is important to them is their personal preservation and gratification that they will actually lose the very thing for which they were looking.

What is the point? The point is that the way that a believer can best experience the love of God is to actually demonstrate God's love to other people. The more that a believer is willing to be like God, the greater will be their ability to see God and to know God. However, it will not be without conflict. The believer must be willing to demonstrate the love of God to that person in their life who is difficult and problematic. They are the test. It is not ignoring that person, or resenting that person, but simply allowing God to demonstrate His love to them through our love for them.

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Zodhiates, 1080.

<sup>2</sup> Kittel, 747.

<sup>3</sup> Lloyd-Jones, 446.

<sup>4</sup> Vine, 903.

<sup>5</sup> Verbrugge, 454.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

Kittel, Gerhard, and Gerhard Fried. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

Lloyd-Jones, Martyn. *Life in Christ - Studies in 1 John*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2002.

Verbrugge, Verlyn D., ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Abridged. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2000.

Vine, W.E. *The Expanded Vine's: Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. A Special Edition. Edited by John R. Kohlenberger III. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1984.

Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. Revised Edition, 1993. Chattanooga, Tennessee: AMG Publishers, 1992.