

Love Flowing from Mercy

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The apostle John is known for many things. He is known as the author of one of the four Gospel accounts, as well as Revelation and the Johannine Epistles. He is known for being the brother of James, and a member of Jesus' inner circle. He is known for his exile on the island of Patmos. But one of the things John is best known for is being the apostle of love.

Tradition holds that when John was very old, nearing the end of his earthly life, he could be heard repeating a short, simple teaching: "Little children, love one another." John spread the message of love to the very end, and his writings continue to give that message to generation after generation of God's "little children."

First John Chapter 3 describes love — specifically, *agape* love — which is more than mere feelings of affection with an expectation of reciprocation, but is a selfless love that is given without expectation or condition. While there is much to say about this unique love of God in Jesus for sinners, in this study **we will look at the connection between the language of love and the language of mercy.**

Keeping in mind that 1 John 3 is not talking about mercy directly, what we can see in this passage is that this *agape* love of God is clearly related to, and flows out of, God's gracious and merciful work for us.

The incarnation itself is perhaps the greatest example of the connection between love and mercy. First, the mercy of God was displayed in that, while we were still sinners, deserving nothing but eternal punishment, Christ came to us. Then, out of that mercy, His *love* was displayed as He bore our burdens, died on the cross for our sins, and rose on the third day. This now brings us, who were once exiled from God, into a special relationship with Him as His children (1 JOHN 3:1).

And now, as God's children, we have the privilege of calling Him "Abba" (Father), the comfort of His presence, and the promise of everlasting life where we shall "be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is" (1 JOHN 3:2). This amazing act of God's love in Jesus clearly relates to, and flows out of, His gracious and merciful work. **Mercy was the starting point, and love was the end point.**

The final section of 1 John Chapter 3 focuses on how now, as those who have "seen" and "known" Jesus, we are not to continue sinning (1 JOHN 3:5-9), but instead are called to participate in that *agape* love of Christ. The starting point of God's love for us in Christ was mercy; our participation in God's love is faith, faith in the mercy and love of God for us. This gift of faith then enables our merciful action toward our neighbor, which mirrors Christ's *agape* love through incarnational burden-bearing and sacrifice for others.

Again, we see that mercy and love are intertwined. Faith looks upon the cross, the loving expression of the mercy of God, and then drives us toward mercy for our neighbor, **which mirrors the incarnational love of Christ.**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Himself invites us into this "mirroring" of the mercy (*eleos*) we have first been shown, saying, "blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (MATT. 5:7). The word Jesus uses for "mercy" in this passage implies kindness and compassion, particularly for those who are afflicted, marginalized and forgotten in society (which certainly fits the context of the rest of the Beatitudes). Jesus declares that, in His kingdom, it is not the rich and proud but the poor, humble and lowly who belong to and are in fellowship with Him.

As Christ came to "seek and save the lost" and was anointed to proclaim Good News to the poor and oppressed, we are called to show mercy (*eleos*) as well, especially to those who are weak, vulnerable, marginalized and most in need. The question is, what does this mercy we are called to show look like?

Using the cross as our guide, we seek not only to care for our most vulnerable neighbor's physical needs, but also share with them the good news of the Gospel, that they may believe in Christ's mercy and forgiveness for them, and become His children. This goes beyond mere lip service, or feelings of pity. Indeed, this is more than a mere bestowing of our generosity. This is an invitation to fellowship with us, in Jesus.

In Jesus' time, those considered weak and vulnerable included orphans, widows, lepers, the blind, the lame, the deaf and mute. Jesus came to them, ate with them, and extended an invitation for them to become His people — and then laid down His life for them.

Among the most vulnerable in our context include the unborn, expectant mothers who may feel a sense of fear and despair concerning their pregnancy, and young families that may not have the resources and support to meet the daily needs of their household.

How can we love these often underserved and forgotten people as Christ first loved us? This may look like donating our "worldly goods" and resources that meet specific needs, supporting organizations that provide services for them, advocating on their behalf according to our vocations, and more. Giving generously of our time, resources and energy to those who are in need is necessary and good, and an expression of God's love in us, as we read in 1 John 3:17.

But to truly mirror the merciful, incarnate work of Jesus Christ is to display a love that goes even further than this. It is to enter into someone's life, as God's mercy brought Christ into ours. It is an invitation to fellowship, as Christ's work brought us into fellowship with Him. It is coming alongside them, joining together with them, and bearing their burdens. Yes, THIS is what it means to be merciful as Christ is merciful, for this love is incarnational and therefore bears the image of Christ's selfless love for us.

Of course, we know from experience that this kind of love is difficult to express! We all struggle to refrain from the "practice of sinning" which we inherited from our first

ancestors. We all struggle to imitate the mercy we have been given. We all, from time to time, resemble Cain, as we hate, despise or neglect our brother. When John exhorts us to love one another in this way, we might respond with, "Well, John, that's *hard*!"

But when our hearts condemn us for our lack of love, John points us again to the cross, reminding us that God is greater than our hearts, and His mercy and pardon are greater than our sin (1 JOHN 3:20). And so, as His children, we ask the Lord to help us love our most vulnerable brother in this way, knowing that we will receive what we ask.

The command of Jesus to love is clear. Love has always been and will always be for *every* human life, whether unborn, elderly or any other human circumstance in between. This call to love as Christ first loved us is the end point and the application of the mercy of God in Jesus which we believe, teach and confess, and the basis for much of the work of life ministries in our Synod.

But the starting point for any faithful expression of *agape* love is mercy. God's mercy for us, and our mercy for our neighbor.

The church continues to stand up for the disadvantaged and marginalized, giving generously to causes that help those who need it most. We seek to not only provide for those most in need, but also to enter into the lives of the poor, the mourning, the lowly among us. We seek to walk beside them, inviting them into our homes and hearts, sharing in their burdens, and moving from mere charity to the lasting bonds of fellowship and community as the redeemed children of God. For this is what God has given to us in Christ in our great time of need, when we were poor and lowly.

What the unborn, the pregnant mother, the young family and all those whom the world has cast out or forgotten need most is the incarnational love of Jesus. As people who have received mercy, the church is able to speak the language of love fluently.

Questions

1. Read 1 John 3:1. God calls sinners like us His children: Why is this the ultimate act of *agape* love? How does this help us to better show mercy to others, even those who some may feel might not "deserve" it?
2. John talks about how Christian love looks in the world, but also talks about how a *lack* of Christian love looks in the world. According to 1 John 3:4, what does this lack of love look like? Why would this result be especially harmful toward the marginalized in a given society?

3. Showing mercy toward those who are most in need is also a way in which we stand out to the world as the redeemed children of God. Read John 13:34–35. Why is this kind of merciful love a better witness to the world than love which is self-seeking?
4. In 1 John 3:2, John refers to the physical resurrection of our glorified bodies, as we will one day “be like him.” (This is similar to Paul’s teaching of the physical resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15). How does God’s plan for the restoration of our physical bodies help us see the importance of caring for our neighbor’s physical needs even before the day of the resurrection?
5. First John 3:4–8 is a difficult passage: Although we are children of God, we still have our old sinful flesh which clings to us. What comfort does John give us in 1 John 3:20? What comfort does he give us earlier in his epistle, in 1 John 1:9?
6. In 1 John 3:11–15, John takes us back to the example of Cain who murdered his brother, after which he asks God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (GEN. 4:1–12). Does this attitude exist today when it comes to helping mothers in crisis pregnancies and young families that need assistance? How would you answer someone who asked Cain’s question?
7. The Greek word for “mercy” (*e/eos*) is where we get the word “almsgiving” from. Almsgiving in the Bible was an outward sign of Christian love for others, which typically involved a sort of sacrifice which helped form a spirit of community. How does the idea of almsgiving connect with our study of this passage and the concept of the language of mercy?
8. According to 1 John 3:16–18, what is the ultimate motivation for caring for the Body of Christ?
9. There are many who see their faith as nothing more than knowledge and right doctrine, and very little to do with compassion and human care. How does this faith without mercy toward those in need go against John’s teaching in 1 John 3:17–18?
10. In the Small Catechism, Luther explains the Fifth Commandment (thou shalt not murder) by saying we should fear and love God so that we support our neighbor in “every physical need.” When we see someone in need, in what ways do we often rationalize withholding our earthly goods and loving mercy toward them? How is this even easier to do when they are unseen and/or unheard people in society (such as the unborn)?
11. We know that God sees all life as valuable. How is a compassionate, life-aiding and life-affirming response to those who are in crisis consistent with how God values life, as opposed to alternatives like abortion?
12. What would be the possible rationale for *not* showing mercy and compassion toward the unborn? What arguments have you heard? Read Psalm 139:13–16. How does this passage challenge these often-used arguments against mercy for the unborn? (SEE ALSO LUKE 1:41–45.)
13. First John 3:18 says, “Let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.” In the age of social media, it is easy for us to pay lip service to helping those in need, and to believe that this is enough. How does this attitude fall short of what John is exhorting us toward?
14. When you see someone who does not have the power or resources to change their difficult circumstances, the Christian response should be compassion. What might compassion look like toward a single mother? A pregnant teenager? A young family in a financial crisis? A grieving post-abortive couple?

- 15.** The “world’s goods” in verse 17 refers to the earthly blessings we have been given by God. What are some ways that we could as individuals use the “world’s goods” to help those in need, particularly young families and mothers who are facing pregnancy? How could a congregation use her resources for these acts of mercy?
- 16.** We all fail to love our neighbor in many and various ways, and in this chapter, there are harsh words for those who practice sin. Read 1 John 3:21–23. What hope does this verse give to those who still wrestle with sin? Is there grace for those who have had abortions or pressured others into having one, who are repentant and grieving? What is our relationship with God ultimately based upon? (ALSO SEE EPH. 2:8–9, ROM. 5:1–2.)
- 17.** Along with using our tangible goods to help those in need, those with resources are also called to use their position and voice to bring mercy to the vulnerable. This may include participating in the March for Life or calling/emailing elected officials to create protections and services for the unborn and expectant mothers. What other ways could you advocate for these groups who often do not have a voice?



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