

Dear Christian brethren,

How can you tell if someone is alive or dead? If they are skateboarding or talking to you, they are probably alive. But what about if they are unconscious and unmoving? But how can you be sure? Doctors have tests, but any good doctor will admit that they are only about 99% accurate. Let's consider something even harder, though. How can you tell if someone is SPIRITUALLY alive or dead? We can't see the soul, but there are still some visible signs that are pretty good evidence of whether someone is alive. John writes, Dear friends, let us love one another, because love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

John goes back to BIRTH for LIFE, then to LIFE for love. When the Holy Spirit enters the soul through the implanting of the Gospel in Word and Baptism, spiritual life begins as someone is brought to faith and grows in faith. As a baby comes out of the womb and cries and breathes and learns how to walk and talk, so a Christian comes from the womb of God's grace in the death and resurrection of Jesus and learns how to LOVE.

Being BORN is different than being CREATED. If an artist creates a piece of art, it might REFLECT his wisdom or his skill and give you a little bit of or even a lot of insight into what he is like, but it doesn't take on his very nature or take on his DNA. But when someone is BORN of God, then it is saying that we receive more than creation from the outside - we have the very characteristics and nature of God as God lives in us!

Imagine the human being, created by God, but having an emptiness in the soul, designed specifically to have life, to have the Holy Spirit living in him or her, like gasoline in a gas tank. Throughout his or her life, she is trying to find purpose, trying to find origin, trying to find meaning, to fill that empty hole in his or her soul. He seeks it through a job or money. She seeks it through a marriage or a relationship. But the emptiness remains. The void is being filled with stuff that doesn't make us run right. No matter what he's achieved, it doesn't bring contentment. No matter how much entertainment is sought, it doesn't fill the void. The big picture, origin and destiny remain an enigma until the Holy Spirit comes in and fills the emptiness with Jesus. Then you know where your life comes from and what your life is for. NOW there is life. Now there is origin. Now there is purpose. This is what you were born again for. You've found your family in Christ.

But there's a secondary aspect needed for this love to really grow within someone born of God. We must know what this means and what is involved to be born of God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Shouldn't there be a natural desire for you to know God when you are baptized into His family? How can you live to your potential if you don't know who God is? How can you know what it means to live a Christian life if you don't get to know His family, either? So, what does that mean? I should go to the SOURCE. I should open my Bible, the revealed Word of God, and find out more about Him, so I know who I AM, too! I should go to where His family meets and get to know them better, too. How many are there who have been baptized but never take the time to seek and find the God who washed them clean? So, they look at sin and death in the world, and they assume all kinds of nasty things about God. Others assume that everyone who goes to church is a bunch of hypocritical, judgmental yuppies. They have no real clue!

What is THE defining characteristic that John wants us to KNOW about God? First and foremost, John wants us to know that God is love. What a great thing! God could be anything He wanted to be. He could be a dictator or a bully. He could be petty or indifferent. But He's not! He's LOVE! That is the defining characteristic of God. It is what He IS.

But what is love? John doesn't just leave "love" out there, undefined as a feeling, an emoji, or two hands held together in the shape of a heart. He doesn't just let us determine for ourselves what we THINK love is or how love acts. "I don't think a loving God would..." No. It is defined by a specific person, a specific place, and a specific action.

What is it? It is that God could not bear to see us die in our sins, condemned to hell. Love is God crashing into our world through the Virgin Mary, with the angels singing to the shepherds at night, and saying, "I'm going to do something about your sins. I'm going to do something about death. I'm going to do something to earn your forgiveness and to rescue you." God is lovingly active. And what is it? "I'm going to send my Son to SUFFER for you and DIE for you on a cross." So, when we think of love defined, we think of action, and we think of atoning sacrifice. And as I mentioned the other week, atonement means covering. Jesus came to cover our sins with His bloody death and to make us look DIFFERENT - to look HOLY in His sight. This is love defined.

So, what does this mean for us? My God is love! My family isn't perfect, but my family is forgiven! My family knows how to forgive! My family is built on love and sacrifice! My family has a loving Father and a sacrificial Son and Saviour! This could be a great thing! We have a perfect, merciful, heavenly, and forgiving Father, with a loving and sacrificial Son and Brother in Christ who wants to have a relationship with us.

How do we live? This then is the command we have from him: The one who loves God should also love his brother. Anyone can say, “I love God.” If it means I throw a few prayers His way, sing Him some songs, listen to the Bible occasionally, I'm down with that. I can do that. That doesn't take too much work. But John points you to the guy or gal next to you, the one who snores. The one who is obnoxious. The one who is needy. The one who complains about doing his chores. The one who just can't seem to get his act together. The one who says hurtful things occasionally and makes your life pretty hard. He says, “There! Love THAT guy!”

I don't have to crucify myself on a cross for the sins of the world. I don't have the call to raise people from the dead or perform miracle cures. I don't have to be God or Messiah. But that doesn't mean I don't make smaller and less painful sacrifices. That doesn't mean God can't work through me. And it's those loving little sacrifices that are so different from the world's mindset. This is what I'm born to do.

But do you see how John changes this? How does Jesus change this? Life is about using your time and energy to make sacrifices for people and give them what they need. You live your life OUTSIDE of yourself for OTHERS, instead of INSIDE yourself worrying about what others are doing for YOU. Instead of waiting for someone to come to you, go to them as Jesus came to you. You think about your spouse or your children. What can I sacrifice for them? It can be your parents, your neighbours, or your fellow Christians here at church.

And here's the thing: it doesn't have to be FUN or ENJOYABLE. IT's not about ENTERTAINMENT. It doesn't have to be easy or convenient. Oftentimes, it is not. It's being painfully patient with someone who is complaining and lazy. It's putting in time and effort to put food on the table or fix a broken car. If they need food, you bring them some food. If they need prayers, you get on your knees and pray. If they need your patience, then

give it to them. Get medicine for them. Buy groceries for them. Make their lunches. Rub their feet. Go to their games. Encourage them in their lives. Invite them to church. Pray for them. Tell them of Jesus. Whatever they need. Loving your brother isn't just a philosophy. It's a bread-and-butter type of life. It's nothing romantic at all. But when you live this life of love, when you are making sacrifices for people, then you become a vestige of Jesus to them, in order for them to see Jesus through you and in you. When you go to bed tired and exhausted, you know you've lived a day of love.

I now see my life as one of crucifixion for those who are in my life. I want to make sacrifices for them. Take time for them. I have to sacrifice the sinful and lazy nature that doesn't want to live outside of me. Do things for them that will bless them. I want to put them first. I want them to be forgiven. I want them to repent of their sins, find forgiveness at the cross, and be in a good relationship with Jesus. I don't want to hate any of them. I don't want to ignore them or do nothing for them when they need my help. I don't want to hold grudges towards them. I don't want to live a selfish or lazy life. I am here to love people, even if that love causes me pain and heartache.

You've had a God who has been miraculously good and kind to you. He's given you life. He's shown you love. He's given you purpose. You have people in your life who need love. They need kindness and forgiveness. They need your time. They need your effort. They need your love. What can you do to show them what love truly is, what life is, who God is, to share the life you've been given and be the person you were born to be? All you need is love, and you have plenty of it, in Jesus. Amen.