

God's Love Test

February 15, 2009 - 1 John 3:16-20

It's Family Day and Valentine's Day weekend. There has been a lot of Valentine's Day hoopla going on. Some of us may have celebrated love with our spouse or family or friends. Some of us might be looking for love. For those looking for love, did you know about the love testers out there that will help you?

I typed "love test" into my internet search engine. The first one that came up had a sort of gas gauge on it. You put your name on the left side of the gauge. You put the name of the person you like or love on the right side of the gauge. Then you press enter and an arrow goes up to point to how much love there is between you. So I thought I would punch in Tom for me, and Lori my wife. The arrow started to point up and then stopped half way at 50. Then a little message at the bottom popped up saying "It's time to say it. Timing is the secret." Then I thought I'd see what would happen if I put someone else's name in. So I put another name with Lori. He got a 70 with the message "Great, keep going."

Another site called the "Love Doctor" invites you to type in your name and the name of the one you love. This time Tom and Lori

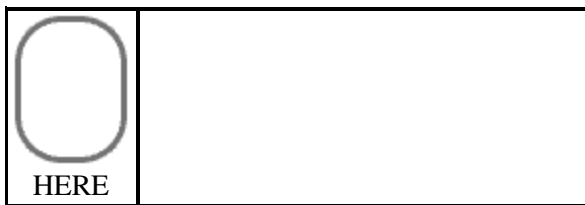
got a 72 with this message: "Dr. Love thinks that a relationship between Tom and Lori has a reasonable chance of working out, but on the other hand, it might not. Your relationship may suffer good and bad times. If things might not be working out as you would like them to, do not hesitate to talk about it with the person involved. Spend time together, talk with each other." Wow. Talk about profound and helpful.

I then punched another name with Lori. They only got a 54 with this message. Dr. Love thinks that a relationship between another person and Lori has a reasonable chance of working out, but on the other hand, it might not. Your relationship may suffer good and bad times. If things might not be working out as you would like them to, do not hesitate to talk about it with the person involved. Spend time together, talk with each other. Wow, talk about adapting the counsel to the situation!

But my favorite one by far is the one I've reproduced on the front page of the insert.

The Amazing Love Tester! Are you:
 SUPER HOT!
 HOT!
 WARM!
 MILD!
 COLD!

THUMB	Enter your Name <input data-bbox="1369 1417 1526 1458" type="text"/> Place your thumb on the Thumbpad and click!
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Somehow it will tell you where you're at on the love meter. So I punched in "Tom." I got "Hot. You are hot! Right on." Then I punched in Justin – Warm – Now You're talking. Then Serge – Cold like that works? As if this works? They'll take your thumb print – name and predict your love meter.

Now on the one hand, we can have a little fun with "tests" like these. But on the other hand, I wonder if people take these "love-testing" sites seriously? I wonder if they use these "results" to make decisions about relationships. Perhaps these sites point to one of the tragedies concerning love in our world. Love is something we desperately crave. We will take our hope for love on a completely ridiculous internet test or we can trivialize it to mean almost nothing. We say "I love you" to a person and then "I love you" to a hamburger!

This confused and trivialized view of love presents a serious challenge to Christians because our faith is all about love. But it's not some trivial love. It is a profound love given by God Himself. The

Bible narrates a story of God's love offered to change the eternal destiny of millions. It cost Jesus His life to offer this love. It cost the Father His Son to offer this love. And He calls people who have received this love, to offer it to others.

In fact, God uses our level of love as a test for faith. So today we are going to look at a much more serious and profound love test; God's love test.

This test is found in a letter, preserved in the New Testament and written by John. He wrote the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation, two pretty famous works. John made up one third of Jesus' inner circle of disciples. There was Peter, James and his brother John. He witnessed Jesus raise a dead girl to life. He watched the transfiguration where Moses and Elijah came down to visit Jesus on the mountaintop. He sat right beside Jesus at the Last Supper. Jesus asked him, Peter and James to watch and pray with him in the garden. John got Peter into the high priest's courtyard after Jesus' arrest. John stood near the cross with Jesus' mother. From the cross, Jesus entrusted her to John's care. John out ran Peter to reach the empty tomb first. So John was pretty close to the action.

He became a leader and writer for the early church. The many have heard of John's Gospel and the Revelation. But John's letters are lesser known. Yet they contain some profound truths that fleshed out the Christian faith for some early Christians. His wrote his first letter to warn readers about false teaching that denied Jesus Christ had come as a human being. In the letter he lays out three tests they can use to distinguish authentic Christians from false ones. The obedience test, the moral test and the love test.

“We know we have come to know Him if we obey His commands” John writes. That’s the obedience test. “No one who continues to sin has either seen Him or known Him.” That’s John’s moral test. But there was a third test that filtered out people who looked like Christians but really weren’t. This was the love test. You can have the right doctrine. You can have the right morality. But you still might not be a Christian if you fail the love test. So this love test is a wonderful gift from God to awaken us to any self-delusion we’ve engaged in. We examine this test in this looking out series because John specifically ties it to the needy. So we are going to examine first John’s build up to the love test.

He lifts biblical love out of any trivial category. Then we’ll come upon God’s love test. We’ll conclude by thinking about our part and God’s help in passing the test. Our text today is 1 John 3:11-20.

1 John 3:11-20 NIV

Love one another

¹¹This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. ¹²Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. ¹³Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. ¹⁴We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. ¹⁵Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.

¹⁶This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ¹⁷If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? ¹⁸Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. ¹⁹This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

John begins by restating a very common theme in his writings. “This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.” John was there when Jesus gave that new command at the last supper: “love one another as I have loved you, so you must love one another.” This is the message John had passed on to these readers from the start.

Then he provides a contrast to this command in verse 12. Cain was Adam and Eve's first born son. He and his younger brother Abel offered sacrifices. God accepted Abel's but rejected Cain's. So Cain hated his brother. He got so angry that he struck out and killed Abel. Cain committed the world's first murder. Someone committing murder is not full of God's love. They're likely full of hate at that moment. They don't have eternal life in them because they aren't full of God's love. Hate and murder are connected.

John now unpacks that incident for us. He declares that Cain belonged to the evil one. The devil's claim on Cain contributed to his murderous actions. In fact Jesus declared in John 8:44 "the devil was a murderer from the beginning." So it is not only sin in general which is "of the devil" but hatred and murder in particular.

But John goes beyond this general connection to reveal motive. In the second half of verse 12 he asks "And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brothers were righteous." So Cain's jealousy lay behind his hatred. He jealously resented his brother's walk with God.

Then John draws a little connection to our experience. John versus Paul – not as strictly logical in argument, more flowing spontaneous in thought. Verse 13 – "Do not be surprised if the world hates you." When people are children of the devil, they hate righteousness. This can come out in a jealousy hatred combo. So if you've got some non-Christian constantly dogging you with criticism or cutting comments, your relationship with God might be the target. The NIV hides the dramatic change in status by using the word "from" to describe the transition from death to life. But you go from point A to point B in everyday life. "From" does not communicate the drastic relocation we experience when we come to Christ. The text literally says – "we know we have passed out of death into life. It's like God moved us directly from winter to summer – out of hell into heaven – out of prison into freedom!

Then verse 14. He comes back to the love command. "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers." Becoming a Christian is nothing less than a resurrection or quickening to life. We come out of spiritual death into spiritual life.

When we love, we reveal that dramatic spiritual change. We reveal who we belong to. We no longer live under death's reign or Satan's reign/rule. But when someone does not love, they might still be in death.

In verse 15 John makes this point. "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him." Lack of love is evidence of spiritual death. Hate reveals as much as love. But how does he get from hate to murder to no eternal life?

Therefore, if anyone hates his brother, John concludes the hater does not have eternal life either. Because to hate is to be a murderer maybe not in body but in mind. Remember Jesus word's in the Sermon on the Mount. "You have heard that it was said long ago, "Do not murder," and "anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment . . . anyone who says "you fool" will be in danger of the fire of hell."

John picks up on this. He strips away any trivial approach we might have to love and hate. He exposes that hate is a huge red flag

warning of a potentially fatal heart condition. Hate is ultimately what Adam and Eve chose in the Garden. Hate is what their son Cain chose towards their second son, Abel. Hate and death dominated the world.

But then Jesus came and changed everything. Verse 16: This is how we know what love is. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us." He surrendered his life for us. He showed us the essence of love – self-sacrifice. He gave Himself up on the cross. Cain's hatred resulted him committing murder. Christ's love resulted in his submitting himself to be murdered on our behalf. That's self-sacrificing love; that's God's love in action!

Then John draws out the implication for us. Here we discover God's love test. It starts in the second half of 16. "And we ought also to lay down our lives for our brothers." Now that sounds very noble and heroic. It might be cool to imagine taking a bullet for your brother or sister.

But then John gives us a very ordinary action in verse 17. "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" So there's the test, will you lay down your life for others by giving to those in need?

Because Christ laid down His life for us, we lay down our lives for others by giving to the needy. We can discern whether or not we have God's love in us by our attitude towards those in need. It's like John says "You know that immeasurable, unbelievable self-sacrificing love Jesus demonstrated on the cross? Imitate that. Lay down your lives for others by showing love to the needy.

But did you notice John approaches this in an indirect way? He doesn't say "give to the needy which shows your self-sacrificing love." He describes a scene; imagine a Christian who has material possessions. Maybe he or she is a middle class Christian living in St. Albert, Alberta. Then that Christian notices a needy person. He/she sees, considers or discovers a person in need that could be helped. But then he/she deliberately draws back from offering assistance. NIV says- He has no pity on him. ESV says- he closes his heart to him. He sees the need, then draws back- shuts down compassion – hardens his heart. What is John's conclusion at the end of 17? "Well, he/she probably had a bad day. As long as he gives the next time the plate is past, it's okay."

No! "How can the love of God be in him?" We might have all the right doctrine. We might have the correct morals. But if we show no pity to someone in need, our very salvation is questionable. Something huge is missing. The immeasurable self-sacrificing love of Christ either has never been received or it is grossly under appreciated. "How can the love of God be in him?"

True love is revealed in self-sacrifice. Not many of us are called to lay down our lives in some deed of heroism. But we have plenty of opportunities in daily life to show compassion. One commentator defines love this way: "Love is the willingness to surrender that which has value for our own life, to enrich the life of someone else." The eternal life within us is revealed not by stating "I love all mankind" but by showing love to one of mankind. If God placed a needy person in our path today, would we pass the test? What will we do in light of this truth?

My friends, I feel compelled to speak to those of you who live at home with a brother or sister or multiple brothers and sisters. It might be difficult to live with your siblings. Your brothers and/or sisters might bug you. Your parents might make decisions that seem

unfair. You might think that one of your siblings is the favorite.

These things can be challenging. I am not saying you should cover up wrongdoing or take abuse.

But please do not let your feelings grow into hatred for your brother or sister. Please guard your heart from going down that path. Ask the Lord for His help and strength to show love for your sibling. If you find there is hatred in your heart towards them, will you come to God and confess that? Will you cry out to God and appeal to Him for release from a Cain like attitude? Will you talk to your parents- or if you can't talk to them – one of the Pastors. Please heed the warning of this passage. Don't harbor hate. Confess to your sibling.

If you're not a Christian here today, the Bible puts you in Cain's camp. You likely have not murdered anyone. But if there is hate in your heart that is a huge indicator that you live under hate's reign. That reign can end if you put all your trust in Christ. You first need to admit that you cannot pull yourself out from the hatred-jealousy trap and ownership by the devil, then trust in Christ. He laid down His life so that the price for hatred and murder and jealousy was paid in full. You need to forget trusting in yourself and put your trust

on Him. Then God will drench you with His Gospel and Jesus and the Holy Spirit who will empower you to start walking in life; seeing with love and acting with self-sacrifice.

To all Christians collectively, Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. Now God calls us to lay down our lives for others. Specifically the test comes in our attitude towards those in need. But we're not allowed to get away with simply checking our attitude. We have to act on it. This is God's love test. Two weeks ago, we ended the first part of looking out to the poor by asking God to open our eyes to see the poor. Donna has given us a glimpse of that in our own community today. Now how might we respond? How much do we give to those in need? Does that only happen with our surplus at Christmas if we have a surplus?

John Newton once captained a slave ship. God saved that wretch and he wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace." He also became a pastor. Many of Newton's papers and letters were preserved. One letter was penned to a young husband seeking advice about how much to give to the poor.

Newton begins by expressing displeasure at the worldly way in which most Christians handle their economic affairs: *“For the most part, we take care first, to be well supplied, if possible, with all the necessities, conveniences, and not a few of the elegancies of life; then to have a snug fund laid up against a rainy day that when we look at children and near relatives, we may say to our hearts, “Now they are well provided for.” And when we have gotten this and more, we are perhaps content, for the love of Christ, to bestow a pittance upon the poor.*

Then Newton lays out the guidelines: *Choose a standard of living which is “barely decent” free from the “conveniences and elegancies. Above that, spend every penny on the poor for every penny we spend on ourselves.* In other words Newton counseled the young man to adopt a modest lifestyle so he could support the poor. Once the necessities of life were looked after, half of the young man’s disposable income was to be given to the poor.

In Luke 14:12-14, Jesus instructs us to take the money we ordinarily spend on entertainment and recreation with friends and use it for the family’s ministry to the poor.

Each family needs to engage in some sort of ministry to those in need. Many of you are already doing this. I commend you for your giving, care and concern for those in need in your life. Please recognize this indicates God’s love dwells in you.

We need to recognize that some are called to radical hospitality and giving away of income. We need to show grace to each other in how much we give to those in need. They might have the gift of helps or mercy. So we must not rationalize our responsibility away by claiming we don’t have that gift. Nor must we guilt ourselves before the example of others with that gift.

Instead, start by pondering the lavish gift Christ has given us by laying down His life for us. Then ask Him to reveal who He asks you to lay down your life for in response to His love. Internet love tests trivialize love. God has offered true love by laying down His life for us. Lets ask for His help to offer that love to those in need around us.