

INTRODUCTION

Every business focuses on something. It can be a particular service, certain food or a specialized product. We say that it is the signature of the company. If you can come up with a signature service for renovating houses, a signature steak or a signature handbag then you may have a good opportunity for success. Customers will associate the name of your business with a quality product or service. When I first came to U.S. twenty some years ago, I went through a culture shock. There were some humorous moments too. Let me share one with you. I knew that Americans are very conscious about their health. They love to exercise. The school I attended is in a small city. When I traveled from one area to another part of the town, I saw quite a few body shops. I thought: “Yeah, it makes sense. People love to keep themselves in good shape. But those body shops don’t look gyms at all!” Later I found out that those shops are not for training human bodies, but they are places for fixing damaged car bodies. Repairing crashed cars is the signature of those stores. What is the signature for Christians? The secular world loves to reveal the ugly things prominent church leaders did. It can be fraud, greed for materialism or misbehavior of children. But should there not be some positive changes because of our fellowship with God? In this passage, the apostle John stated that love is a signature of God’s children.

EXPLANATION

1. 愛的缺乏 Absence of Love (v. 11-15)

First of all, John told us not to live in the absence of love. He said in **verse 14**: We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. The absence of love indicates that a person is spiritually dead and does not have eternal life. It has the same meaning as no fellowship with God or walking in darkness John mentioned earlier in this letter. One who does not have love on the inside may harbor hatred. John quoted the example of Cain in **verse 12**: Do 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. It is about the first murder in the human history. Genesis 4 tells us that Cain and Abel were the sons of Adam. Cain was a farmer and Abel kept animals. They both presented an offering to God. The Lord found favor in the firstborn sheep and fat Abel gave, instead of the crops Cain offered. Thus, Cain became mad, so much so that he killed his own brother. Uncontrolled anger may lead to killing. We can think of examples in the Bible like king Saul plotting to kill David, and even Jesus was sentenced to death on the cross because of hatred from the Jewish religious leaders. Just recently a man in the state of New York ramped his car into a family. He did it not only once, but he backed the car up and hit those people again. The mom died on the scene. It all started when the father asked the man not to smoke in front of his kids. How tragic! Hatred is a possible result when two parties have conflicting interests. In the passage, John added that even the world hates us simply because we are children of God. He was citing what Jesus told His disciples in the gospel of **John 15:19** – “If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” As Christians, we live in this fallen world but we

do not belong to the world. We will naturally be hated by the world. Therefore, do not be surprised if your classmates keep a distance with you because you say grace at lunch. Your supervisor may promote another colleague over you because you openly talk about your faith. Those are just personal issues. On a greater scale, the world is using media, culture and politics to systematically attacks what we stand for. When we tell the world that Jesus is the only way to salvation, people labels us as narrow-minded. The world rejects the fact that God created two genders. People fight for their rights to allow men to compete with women in sports. The world defines that a baby living in a mother's womb is not a human being. A woman has the so-called right to do whatever she wants. Chelsea Clinton, whose mom aspired to become the first lady President a few years back, recently called the pro-life people anti-choice. These and many other examples are advocated by people who encourage tolerance. You have to accept their weird demands, but they cannot tolerate what the Bible says. See the hypocrisy there? As Christians, we have to imitate God's love to love everyone. We hate sin, but we should always love sinners. However, we cannot compromise the truth. If we do not grieve about what is happening in our society then perhaps our hearts have turned cold and numb. If we do not feel the hatred from the world, then we may be trying to survive by blending in. On a personal level we need to ask ourselves if we hate others, even our own brothers and sisters-in-Christ. I am not talking about personal preference. For example, I like this person over another person because he loves fishing or certain kind of music just like I do. Also, I am not referring to differences in personality. For instance, I do not want to get close to a particular person because she has hot temper or she likes to complain. I am talking about deliberate hatred toward a member of God's family, or even your own family members. There may be some past conflict or offense involved. If there is any hatred in your heart, you need to ask the Lord to deal with it. You need to ask the Lord to forgive you because you hold onto a grudge. Then you should ask God to give you the courage and strength to forgive that person from your heart. You should never condone any sin, but you can choose to accept the person who once hurt you.

2. 愛的彰顯 Appearance of Love (v. 16-20)

Love is a signature of God's children. John told us that the absence of love indicates that a person has not been saved. On the contrary, a person who loves reflects that he/she has an eternal relationship with God. But how does love appear? John told us in **verse 16**: This 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. The death of Jesus is the perfect model of love. Of course, Jesus did not only set up an example for us to follow. The holy God substituted for us to die. God's love is accompanied by actions. God gives us breathe of life, sunshine, rain, air and food. Parents love their kids through actions too. Once I asked my two boys how they can feel my love for them. My older son is quite practical. He said: "Just give me money or buy me stuff." But my younger son enjoys it when I serve him. It may be as simple as preparing breakfast for him and helping him get ready for school. Jesus loved us to the degree of dying for us. John told us that in the same way, we have to lay down our lives for brothers and sisters. But he continued in **verse 17** and told us that even before we are willing to sacrifice our lives for others, we should be ready to sacrifice other things: 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? Let us analyze this verse a little bit. There is a brother in need. Perhaps he has been out of work for a while and is financially tight, or he needs a ride to the other side of the town, or he speaks limited English and is looking for an interpreter to assist

him. Then John said you have “material possessions,” meaning that you have the resources to help this person. John also added that you know his situation. But then John said you have “no pity on him.” That is a vivid expression as if you closed up your stomach. The Jews depicts one’s belly as the source of one’s emotion. Therefore, to say that one closes up his/her stomach means that the person is being indifferent. John stated that if you do not have any compassion toward a needy brother, then it will be hard for the love of God to dwell in you. The phrase “the love of God” can have a double meaning. The way the Chinese Union Version renders it points to our love for God. If we have no mercy then it is hard for us to say that we love God. John put it this way in **4:20** – ...For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. As an alternative, the NIV Bible indicates that our love for a believer shows that the love of God is in us. We are born to be self-centered. It is God’s love working inside us to motivate us to care for others. It all boils down to three words that all begin with the letter A – aware, ask and action. First, you have to be aware of people’s needs. Second step, ask if they need help. Third, take action. It does not have to be something revolutionary! When you see parents of little ones getting off their cars and holding many things in their hands, go and ask if they need any help. You can either carry the stuff for them or walk their kids across the parking lot. When you come into the building and you see someone behind you, just hold the door for them. When you see a coworker running around with sweat all over, he or she may have five final things to get done before a church meeting begins. That person could be me! Go ask if you can help. It can be as simple as making copies or arranging chairs. When you see elderly brothers and sisters lining up for food, go help them find a seat and you fetch them food and tea. Trust me, more than likely there is plenty of food for everyone. If you do not have anything to eat after you serve others, I will buy you lunch. What are the three A words again? They are aware, ask and action. Besides, you can pay attention to the prayer items sent out on Friday and printed on the bulletin. There are church members who have physical needs. You can write them a card, call them up, cook something for them or pay them a visit. Let them know that you care about them and you are praying for them. Here is an assignment for everyone: start something small this week. Love others by your actions as long as it is appropriate and it is in-line with the truth. I would love to hear from you how you put God’s love into action. Let FCBC be a place flowing with God’s love. When seeker friends come in, they will respond: “Whatever force that inspires these Christians to love others, I want it too!”

3. 愛的持守 Adherence to Love (v. 21-24)

Love is a signature of God’s children. Christians should live in the presence of love and display the appearance of love. Thirdly, John encouraged us to adhere to love. Let us look at **verse 23**: And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. John recalled a command he received from the Lord. There are two requirements in this command. We have to believe in Jesus. The tense for the verb “believe” indicates a one-time action. That pertains to committing ourselves to the Lord after we heard the gospel. The second requirement is to love one another. This “love” is a continuous action. We do not just believe in what Jesus taught us, we also actively carry out His teachings. Once again, it shows that Christianity is not just a personal conviction that has nothing to do with how we conduct our lives. Our desire to obey God’s command to love one another proves that we have an eternal relationship with the Lord. By saying that love is a command, it means that it is not an option. Very often we may follow orders reluctantly. You comply to the speed limit and drive at

30 mph, but the guy behind you keeps pushing you to go faster. Suddenly, he slows down. Why? There is a police car by the roadside. The IRS says April 15 is the last day to file tax to avoid any consequence. Penalty should not be the motivation for obedience in a loving relationship. Many Christians are motivated by guilt, thinking that something bad may happen to them if they do not follow God's instructions. Rather, we should be motivated by grace. It is God who loves us first. Love should be the motivation for abiding God's commands. When God tells us to do something it is for our benefit. Sometimes we parents may misuse our authority. We ask our kids to hand us the TV remote when the device is on the coffee table right in front of us. We ask our children to fetch us a glass of water when we are sitting on the couch doing nothing. However, not so with God. He has no interest to manipulate us. His commands come with blessings. God will listen to our prayer if we obey Him. John said in **verse 22**: (We) receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. Of course, John was not making an empty promise that we will receive whatever we ask from God. The condition for an answered prayer is that our request should coincide with God's will. We need to examine our hearts before we utter a prayer. Are we asking God to bless us just for our own gain? Do we have a heart to allow the Lord to use us as His vessel to bless others? Also, do we look forward to God's response because we love Him and we love others? The secular world advises us to mind our own business. We should protect our personal interests too. The world operates by a principle of you scratch my back and I do yours. People may look at us as fools when we adhere to the practice of love to help people sacrificially. By obeying God's command to love one another we prove to the world that whatever God said in the Bible still works in this age.

CONCLUSION

Love is a signature of God's children. You may say: yes, but many people who practice other religions or even atheists have a loving heart too. That is true. Their motive of love may be different. They may love people selflessly because they want to accumulate enough credits to go to their version of heaven. Even if their intent to love is pure, and they want to help needy people, their source of love is from themselves. For Christians, God inspires us and empowers us to love others. When we rely on Him there will be strength and joy, and not burden. Also, we love not because we want to prove how generous or compassionate we are. We love because we want to give glory to God. God gives me, as a pastor, a lot of opportunities to minister to people. A particular family from the former church I served comes to my mind. The couple are relatively new Christians with two young kids. The wife was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. She suffered a great deal after surgery and chemotherapy. Church people were mobilized to help this family. They cooked for them, and a few sisters took turn to stay with the patient so that her husband could go to work. Of course, we prayed for God's healing too. At one time I had a burden to pray for this family in a special way. I asked God: "Lord, if there is any way I can shoulder part of their pain I am willing." I learned that from Paul's prayer for his fellow Israelites in the book of Romans. I had no idea how God could transfer some of their hardship to me. Soon after my prayer, I did feel a little discomfort for a few days. I do not want to mystify the experience. I am not saying that you should pray like that either. The lesson we can learn is that if God so prompts you to share His love with others, then do not resist the urge. Love people just like how you want God to love you. In case you wonder what happened to the family, the Lord took the sister home. A few years later, God blessed the brother with another wife.