



(Becoming) Lovers in a Dangerous Time: Discipleship as Gift and Task in 1 John

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*But nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight.
Got to kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight
When you're lovers in a dangerous time.*

—Bruce Cockburn

Disciples of Jesus wake up in a world awash in human suffering, racism, injustice, and poverty.¹ But the church faces an additional problem, namely the problem of our own often impoverished response. To put it bluntly: Why are we are so often discouraged by the way we as the people of God respond to the pain of the world around us?

¹ For a lengthier version of this argument that more thoroughly engages the academic literature and brings the argument into dialogue with the civil rights movement's ethic of "militant reconciling love," see Michael J. Rhodes, "Becoming Militants of Reconciling Love: 1 John 3:1–3 and the Task of Ethical Formation," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* (forthcoming).

In a time of turmoil, the Christian community is challenged to become the witness to Christ's love in the world, literally by becoming lovers (of the world) by imitating the Beloved. We are called to become disciples of the God who showered love on us through the incarnation and atoning death of Christ. In his example we have the courage to love.

Perhaps part of the answer to that question lies in our failure to receive the gift and embrace the task of discipleship. For Christians, such a failure is akin to forgetting how to live the answers to the questions

- *Who* are we?
- *Where* are we? and
- *When* are we?²

Such forgetfulness is neither unintentional nor, as in the case of a friend facing Alzheimer's, the result of an invading disease. It is instead a forgetfulness we have fostered through our resistance to the ongoing work of Jesus.

In the midst of such failures, I want to suggest that the little letter we call 1 John offers us an invitation: to become the disciples Jesus has made and is making us to be; to receive the love of Jesus and become lovers ourselves, even in dangerous times. In what follows, then, I'll explore John's depiction of the life of discipleship as both gift and task, before turning to consider what it might look like to respond to John's invitation in relation to the racism and poverty confronting the church today.³

RECEIVING THE GIFT: THE "WHO," "WHERE," AND "WHEN" OF DISCIPLESHIP

First John 3:1–2 gives us John's answers to our "who," "where," and "when" questions. We can explore each of these in turn.

Who Are Disciples?

"Look at what great love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are" (1 John 3:1). In this exuberant exhortation, John offers an answer to his audience's identity question: Who are we? *We are children of the Father*. Just before this outburst, John reminds us that being a child of God is a deeply *moral* reality.⁴ After all, "If you know that he is just, you know that everyone who does justice has been born of him" (2:29).

But for John, this moral identity as God's "just," or "righteous," children is solely the result of God's lavish love. "Look at his love," John declares, the love of the Father that has made us "beloved" children (3:2a).

² These questions address what John Webster refers to as "moral ontology." See John B. Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (New York: T & T Clark, 2001), 283.

³ For reasons of convenience, I have chosen to refer to the author of the epistle simply as "John."

⁴ Cf. J. G. van der Watt, "Ethics in 1 John: A Literary and Socioscientific Perspective," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61, no 3 (1999), 494.

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Where Are Disciples?

Immediately after reminding disciples of *who* they are, John reminds them of *where* they are: "because of this the world does not know us, because it did not know him" (3:1b). The significance of John's seemingly straightforward assertion that disciples are in a world that does not know them, however, turns out to be remarkably hard to pin down. This complexity comes because John uses the Greek word *kosmos*, most often translated "world," in at least three different, yet related, ways.

First, as in the Gospel prologue, John understands the *kosmos* as God's good creation, created through Jesus in the beginning (John 1:1–10) and saved through Jesus's willing assumption of the material world at the incarnation (1 John 4:2, 9, 14). The incarnation of the Creator God as a human being is the *validation* of the intrinsic goodness of the gritty, earthy *kosmos* in which we find ourselves.⁵

But second, and much more strongly stated in the letter, John tells us all is not well in God's good world: "We are from God," but "the whole world lies in the power of the Evil One" (5:19). The *kosmos* has become a battlefield, and all humanity is caught up in the conflict.⁶ Many, even some who had initially appeared themselves to be children of God (2:19), have sided with the enemy, rejecting the incarnate Christ in favor of the *anti*-Christ (4:2–3).

Indeed, for John, we don't start out in some morally neutral position and then pick a side. All humanity is always already "claimed."⁷ "All who have not become children of God are children of the devil (3:10), an identity that John equates with being 'of the world' (2:16; 4:5a)."⁸ As with the children of God, "the character of this worldly family is derived from its demonic parent; unjust, unrighteous, and sinful deeds overflow from the unjust, unrighteous, and sinful character of those like Cain, 'who was of the evil one,' and murdered his brother (3:10–12)."⁹ Such worldly children are *powerless* to practice the justice and love that characterize the children of the Just One who *is* Love (4:16).

⁵ Cf. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 142.

⁶ Cf. Andreas J. Kostenberger, "The Cosmic Trial Motif in John's Letters," in *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson (Atlanta: SBL, 2014), 159.

⁷ Philip Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 10.

⁸ Rhodes, "Becoming Militants of Reconciling Love."

⁹ Rhodes, "Becoming Militants of Reconciling Love."

Nor is it only individual humans who are caught up in this battle. The references to the “things of the world” as being “not of the Father” (2:16–17) suggest that John understands the *kosmos* under the devil’s influence to include human cultures and institutions. Too often, such systems participate in a “systemic defiance of God’s lordship over the world” and a “structural refusal by human authority” to recognize Jesus as King.¹⁰ Cultures, economies, social structures . . . all are affected by the devil’s attempt at a hostile takeover of God’s good creation.

For John, then, the *kosmos* is God’s good world now overrun by the devil and his brood of deceptive powers and false prophets (cf. 4:1; 2 John 1:7). Yet this stark reality is not John’s last word on the *kosmos*. For John, the world is finally and fully the world that *God so loved that he sent his only Son* as a “Savior of the *kosmos*” (4:14). In Jesus, the Creator has returned to reclaim what is his—a rescue operation that has required him to “destroy the works of the devil” (3:8) and offer himself as an “atoning sacrifice for the whole *kosmos*” (2:2). The incarnate Lord liberates the devil’s children by begetting them anew and granting them new life lived “through him” (4:9).

To be a disciple, then, is to find oneself transferred *from* the *kosmos* under the control of the devil and *into* the realm of the God who *is* Light (1:5).¹¹ It is to wake up in a new space, one in which discipleship, previously impossible for us as the devil’s children, now becomes a glorious possibility for us as those born again by the Spirit of God. The answer to the question “Who are we?” is deeply tied to the question “Where are we?” Either we remain both *in* and *of* the world that is passing away, or we are liberated and born into the “Savior of the world’s” realm of love, righteousness, and justice.¹²

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¹⁰ Brian K. Blount, *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh: New Testament Ethics in an African American Context* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 110. Cf. also Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 55–57.

¹¹ See Cornelis Bennema, “Moral Transformation in the Johannine Writings,” *In die Skriflig* 51, no. 3 (2017), 1–7.

¹² Benjamin E. Reynolds, “The Anthropology of John and the Johannine Epistles: A Relational Anthropology,” in *Anthropology and New Testament Theology*, ed. Jason Maston and Benjamin E. Reynolds (London: T & T Clark, 2018), 121.

When Are Disciples?

Finally, John gives disciples an answer to the question “*When* are we?”

Beloved, *now* we are God’s children, but it has *not yet* been revealed what we will be. But we know that when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

John situates our lives as disciples between the “now” and the “not yet,” the time when the true light is already shining and yet the darkness has only begun to pass away (2:8). On the one hand, we are God’s children *now*, already and in the present. On the other hand, disciples are “not yet” what we will be. Our present experience of God’s calling us his children “inaugurates a reality that will be brought to its fruition” only when Jesus returns.¹³

EMBRACING THE TASK: BECOMING DISCIPLES IN THE MEANTIME

John, then, offers disciples a somewhat programmatic answer to our “who,” “where,” and “when” questions. Disciples are the children of God, those whom he has liberated from the power of sin, death, and the devil, and whom God will transform into the likeness of his Son Jesus when he returns. To become a disciple is to join the community of those totally and utterly dependent on Jesus’s saving, rescuing, and transforming love. It is to embrace a way of life that is sheer gift.

All of which makes what John says next so strange: “Everyone who has this hope in him purifies themselves as he is pure” (1 John 3:3). Such language seems almost heretical. Surely it is Jesus who does the purifying! Surely all we have to do is receive the good news and watch God do his transforming work!

Indeed, for many of us, John’s apparent suggestion that disciples should exert their time, thought, and energy in pursuing the kind of character they encounter in Jesus seems deeply problematic. Many in the church—including scholars, pastors, and people in the pews—sense that the liberation of the gospel is not “from vice to virtue, but from vice *and* virtue to the grace of Christ.”¹⁴ John’s suggestion that the life of discipleship includes “purifying oneself” as Jesus is pure seems to be altogether too focused on the power of human effort and the possibilities of human character. The dangers of works righteousness and self-absorption appear to be crouching at the door.¹⁵

¹³ Marianne Mey Thompson, *1–3 John* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 87.

¹⁴ Philip Ziegler, “Completely within God’s Doing: Soteriology as Meta-Ethics in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” in *Christ, Church, and World: New Studies in Bonhoeffer’s Theology and Ethics*, ed. Philip Ziegler and Michael G. Mawson (New York: T & T Clark, 2016), 109. Ziegler is describing Bonhoeffer’s view, but explicitly identifies this claim with the legacy of Luther. Such a sentiment, however, might be equally at home in a variety of contexts, including much recent “apocalyptic” theology and interpretation.

¹⁵ See the warnings on this theme in John Webster, “Communion with Christ: Mortification and Vivification,” in *Sanctified by Grace: A Theology of the Christian Life in Light of God’s Completed Work*, ed. Kent Eilers and Kyle C. Strobel (London: T & T Clark, 2014), 123–24.

Such concerns reflect genuine dangers. The problem is that John goes on and calls us to look to Jesus and proactively purify ourselves in imitation of the character we find there despite those dangers. For John, the gift of transformation that disciples receive is also an invitation to the task of *becoming disciples in the meantime*.

How are we to understand this dynamic? As John Webster put it, the triune God's liberating love changes our lives by "altering the conditions they exist under."¹⁶ Discipleship is indeed a total impossibility for "children of the devil" caught up in a world system shot through with demonic influence. But for those who have been reborn as children of God, discipleship has become a glorious possibility. Such a glorious possibility, however, requires disciples to self-consciously *pursue* a continual process of discipleship, seeking to become, to borrow a phrase from the civil rights movement, "militants of reconciling love."¹⁷ Such moral discipleship demands what Oliver O'Donovan calls the "disciplined and serious laying-hold of that mode of existence which is [ours] already"¹⁸ in Christ.

To speak this way suggests, of course, that our efforts at the task of discipleship are themselves bound up in the triune God's ongoing gifts to us. We are never more than branches whose fruit-bearing capacity is utterly dependent on our remaining intimately united to the vine (John 15:1–5). The gift of God's presence and power at work in disciples is revealed by his having given his Spirit to his people (1 John 4:13). Indeed, Edward Malatesta suggests that John's view of discipleship draws on the Old Testament's promise of a new covenant, a covenant in which the Lord would *give* his people new hearts and a new spirit out of which they would then live transformed lives (cf. 1 John 2:20–27).¹⁹ For John, then, when we embrace the task of discipleship, our action is ever and always dependent on God's own action in us and through us.

How, then, does John suggest disciples embrace this task of purifying themselves as Jesus is pure? John gives many answers, but here I want to focus on one: the disciple's active imitation²⁰ of the sacrificial love of Jesus. For John, imitating Jesus requires us to become lovers in dangerous times, creatively living out the cross-shaped love of Jesus in our own communities.

¹⁶ John Webster, "Eschatology, Ontology and Human Action," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 7, no. 1 (1991), 13.

¹⁷ Larry O. Rivers, "'Militant Reconciling Love': Howard University's Rankin Network and Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Journal of African American History* 99, no. 3 (2014), 223. I am indebted to Cheryl Sanders for drawing my attention to this language. For a brilliant unpacking of this concept, see her 2017 presentation, delivered as part of a teach-in held by the Memphis Center for Urban and Theological Studies in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Dr. King's assassination, available at <https://vimeo.com/239391565>.

¹⁸ Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Leicester: Apollos, 1994), 260.

¹⁹ See Edward Malatesta, *Interiority and Covenant: A Study of [Einai En] and [Menein En] in the First Letter of Saint John* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 23–24.

²⁰ For a monograph-length treatment of imitation in the Johannine literature, see Cornelis Bennema, *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature: A Study of Johannine Ethics* (New York: T & T Clark, 2017).

Becoming Lovers by Imitating the Beloved

The very idea of purifying oneself *as* Jesus is pure points to the importance of imitation for John's account of the life of discipleship. The Greek word translated "as" is *kathos*, and is used throughout the epistle to refer to what Dirk van der Merwe calls a "*kathos*-ethic."²¹ Disciples are called to walk "as" Jesus walked (2:6), to practice "righteousness" or "justice" "as" Jesus is "righteous" or "just" (3:7). Perhaps most centrally of all, John calls disciples both to acknowledge the gift of love they have received in Jesus's laying down of his life for their sakes, and to imitate that love in laying down their own lives for their brothers and sisters (1 John 3:16).

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In two ways John makes clear that such imitation is not some slavish repetition of the particulars of Jesus's life. First, the single concrete example of such cruciform love offered in the entire epistle calls for a creative application of such love rather than a literal reenactment. Immediately after telling his audience to lay down their lives for one another in 3:16, John turns in verses 17–18 to the need for those who have economic resources to imitate Jesus's love by sharing their possessions with their needy brothers and sisters.

Second, John's vision of imitation is both prompted and enabled by one's relationship with Jesus. While sometimes lost in translation, in 3:1 John calls disciples to *look at* the Father's love embodied in Jesus. The language here almost always refers to actual sight,²² and in 3:2, John reminds us that it is only through a final, transforming, face-to-face vision with Jesus that we will ever become fully what God intends us to be. The moral work of imitating Jesus, then, only happens as we fix our eyes on Jesus in relationship with him.

Recent studies in social cognition provide a window into how face-to-face relationships elicit and enable transforming imitation. Newborn babies, for instance, begin imitating their parents' facial expressions within minutes of birth.²³ Some scientists present evidence for the existence of "mirror neurons" that fire in the same way whether a person is performing an action or observing someone perform an action, expressing an emotion through facial expressions or observing others "expressing their emotions." These studies show that face-to-face, interpersonal

²¹ Dirk G. van der Merwe, "A Matter of Having Fellowship: Ethics in the Johannine Epistles," in *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt (New York: de Gruyter, 2006), 547, 554. Bannema argues that such language indicates mimesis twelve times in the Johannine corpus (Bannema, *Mimesis*, 40).

²² Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 30 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 387.

²³ Susan Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul's Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 66.

imitation is one key way we humans gain new skills and habits, develop emotional empathy, and acquire similar character traits to those we imitate.²⁴ These studies also provide an analogy for understanding how our imitation of Jesus is made possible by our relationship with him: in imitation, “the movements are mine, but I am also moved” by another.²⁵

None of this changes the fact that imitating Jesus requires our active effort. “Purifying” ourselves as he himself is “pure” is hard work. Indeed, according to John, embracing imitation requires us to proactively put to death those habits and tendencies that linger from life lived under the devil’s influence and to actively stir up the gift of love he has given us in our relationship with others. Theologians have often described this process using the language of “mortification” and “vivification.” It’s worth exploring how John fleshes this process out in his command that disciples imitate Jesus’s laying down of his life for his people by their laying down of their economic resources for the poor.

For instance, in 2:12–14, John declares that disciples already “know the Father,” have had their sins forgiven, and have even “overcome the evil one.” As we have seen, disciples of Jesus have received the gift of a powerful new birth, a relocation from the world that is passing away into God’s new family. They are now children and have received his Spirit such that they need none to teach them (2:27).

Nevertheless, work still remains! In 2:15, John declares with equal vehemence that those who have received the gift of discipleship are still in danger of continuing with the habits and disordered desires associated with their old life in the world that is passing away.

Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. Because everything that is in the world, the craving of the flesh and the craving of the eyes and the pride of possessions,²⁶ is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its cravings, but the one who does the will of God remains forever. (1 John 2:15–17)

The challenge is for those who have received the gift of discipleship to embrace the task of discipleship by *putting to death* their disordered loves.

And how familiar we are with these particular disordered loves! It’s easy to see why scholars believe John’s “mini-catalogue of vices” would have been understood by his audience as the greed, gluttony, and sexually depraved lifestyles

²⁴ Istan Czachesz, “From Mirror Neurons to Morality: Cognitive and Evolutionary Foundations of Early Christian Ethics,” in *Metapher-Narratio-Mimesis-Doxologie: Begrundungsformen fruhchristlicher und antiker Ethik* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 274–75.

²⁵ Eastman, *Paul and the Person*, 68.

²⁶ The Greek word is *bios*, which is often translated “life.” I have chosen to translate “possessions” here to highlight the close connection between John’s words in this passage and the only other use of *bios* in the Johannine corpus, in 1 John 3:17, where the reference is clearly to possessions.

especiallly available to those who are socioeconomically better off.²⁷ The language of the “pride of possessions” may even suggest that the wealthier members of the community were rather proud of the higher status they had managed to attain by pursuing their desires.²⁸

But such habits and tendencies are, for John, *vices* associated with the devil that get in the way of the disciple’s imitation of Jesus’s sacrificial love.²⁹ In a world of grinding poverty and social vulnerability, worldly obsession with power and status easily becomes a kind of hatred for the poor and marginalized that aligns us with Cain, “who was of the evil one, and murdered his brother” (3:12).

Such addictive, vicious desires must be put to death if we are ever to imitate Jesus’s sacrificial love. John makes it clear that this is particularly true when it comes to the sort of self-sacrificial imitation that includes sharing our economic resources with the poor.

In this we know love, that he laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our siblings. Whoever has the world’s possessions, and sees his sibling who has need, and shuts up his heart from them, how can the love of God remain in him? Children, let us not love in word nor in tongue but in action and truth. (1 John 3:16–18)

Here John brilliantly draws our attention to the moment of *seeing* one of our siblings in need, and the temptation to actively “close our hearts,” to shut down our affections, to guard our emotional life from being moved by the suffering of our brothers and sisters in Christ, lest we be so moved that we open wide our hands in generosity. John demands that we put to death precisely those habits in which we have so often invested time and energy cultivating, habits of upwardly mobile self-interest, and a cultivated distance from the poor and the oppressed.

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²⁷ William Loader, “The Significance of 2:15–17 for Understanding the Ethics of 1 John,” in Culpepper and Anderson, *Communities in Dispute*, 223–35.

²⁸ Jorg Frey, “Ethical Traditions, Family Ethos, and Love in the Johannine Literature,” in *Early Christian Ethics in Interaction with Jewish and Greco-Roman Contexts* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 178–80.

²⁹ While we are far too familiar with the attraction of never-ending acquisition and status-seeking in our own day, we do well to remind ourselves that John wrote to a community that was almost certainly mainly made up of the debilitatingly poor. Even the “wealthy” might have been no more than those *aspiring* to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Cf. Judith Lieu, *I, II, III John*, New Testament Library, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 151.

Imitating Jesus's death through costly economic self-sacrifice, however, also requires disciples to stir up and actively embrace those virtuous habits and dispositions of love that we have received through the Spirit. To love in "deed" and "truth," in other words, will require disciples to embrace a different kind of seeing and feeling. We will strive to see in the destitute another child of God for whom Christ died, and actively seek to stir up a loving affection for those who are suffering. Imitating Jesus requires that we open up the new eyes and hearts we've received as children of the Father so we might lay down our lives for one another, and particularly for the poor.

RECEIVING THE GIFT AND EMBRACING THE TASK TODAY

How then might John respond to our frequent sense that the church is failing to respond to the brokenness and pain of our world? I suggest he might start by reminding us of the who, where, and when of our discipleship. John would draw our attention to the world-shattering reality that while we were living as willing, sinful slaves of the devil, the Father sent his Son to *destroy* the work of the devil, offer himself as an atoning sacrifice for our sins, and give us new life as God's children (3:8; 2:2; 2:28–3:2). He would remind us that because God has made us his children, he has liberated our lives by changing the conditions we live under. Before receiving the gift of discipleship, a life of loving faithfulness was impossible. Having received that gift, we are now empowered and equipped to embrace the task of becoming lovers in these dangerous days when the darkness has only begun to pass away.

But John would also remind us that embracing the task of discipleship includes actively seeking to imitate Jesus's self-sacrificial death. Such imitative self-sacrifice requires us to put to death those vicious habits and desires bound up in the world that is passing away, and to stir up the habits and affections of love we have received through our relationship with the God who *is* Love (4:16). I expect that, just as John specifically called his original audience to see afresh the suffering of their siblings, to actively open their hearts and hands to them in costly loving service, he would also call American Christians to similar specific and costly action.

He might even point out particular ways American Christians have often refused to do just that. After all, for several centuries, white American Christians refused to treat their Black brothers and sisters in Christ as siblings, and actively enslaved them instead. Indeed, many American churches disciplined their flocks to close their hearts to the cries of the oppressed, to refuse to see the brutality, torture, and sexual exploitation of chattel slavery. In the service of such anti-discipleship, American pastors wrote the vast majority of all written defenses of slavery in this country.

American white Christians too often closed their eyes and hearts to the brutality of the post-Civil War era as well. Too often they passively ignored or actively embraced the vicious lust for power and gain that undergirded a white supremacist

culture that lynched thousands and deprived millions of wealth and opportunity. During the civil rights movement, many white American Christians taught themselves to see the protests of their Black brothers and sisters as the agitations of communists and rabble-rousers rather than as the outcry of the oppressed.

And every single day, white Christians like me face the temptation to shut our hearts, and therefore our hands and our lives, to our brothers and sisters who are crying out in protests and in prison cells, members of God's family living in slums created by oppressive zoning laws and attending schools segregated by design, siblings in Christ who fear for their safety even in interactions with those sworn to serve and protect.

In the face of such temptations, John shows us that when we live lives of habituated resistance to the outcries of our suffering siblings, we are like disciples who have forgotten the answers to the most basic questions about who we are in Jesus. John reminds us of those answers—answers centered on the reality that we have been made children of God through Jesus's love—and then invites us to *become* disciples by striving to follow in the footsteps of the one who laid down his life for his people.

CONCLUSION

Embracing this task of discipleship today will be costly and complicated, as it no doubt was for John's original audience. In light of that difficulty, I would like to end by offering a word of warning and two words of hope.

First, the warning: John calls us to look to Jesus and seek to emulate the sacrificial love we see there. Yet John also reminds us that "what we will be has not yet been revealed," because we will only truly become what we are meant to be when we see Jesus "as he is" (1 John 3:2). Yes, John calls disciples to seek to live like their Lord. But he also reminds them that, in this life, this is always a partial, imperfect, ongoing process. As we seek to become lovers of God and neighbor, we must simultaneously reject the kind of overconfidence and attempts at control that constantly plague our efforts to live as the people we have been given to become.³⁰

This warning, however, is also the first word of hope. Our transformation, and the transformation of our world, is literally "beyond us,"³¹ awaiting and depending on the risen Jesus's return. Jesus does not offer us a transformation we can manage, control, manipulate, or achieve ourselves. But by revealing himself to us as the risen Lord, Jesus *does* offer us a transformation we can rely on and rest in. John's depiction of our hopes as utterly dependent on Jesus's return deals a death blow not only to our arrogance but also to our anxiety. We can embrace the task of discipleship with energy and joy, while leaving the inevitable failures and unsure short-term outcomes in the hands of our King.

³⁰ This phrase is drawn from Brian Brock and Bernd Wannenwetsch, *The Malady of the Christian Body: A Theological Exposition of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, vol. 1 (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 12.

³¹ My thanks to John Barclay for putting it like this to me in personal correspondence.

Finally, the result of answering John's summons is not navel-gazing self-obsession, nor world-hating withdrawal. It is the formation of a community that lives out the justice, love, and liberation of God in a world system whose demonic domination is being overturned by the power of Jesus. As Brian Blount puts it in his account of "New Testament ethics in an African American context," John offers us an "ethic of active resistance . . . [advocating] the creation of a visible community" whose life of love "sets it apart and makes it a viable, recognizable alternative to the traditional ways of being and living in the world."³²

Moreover, because every child of God began life in enmity to God under the influence of the demonic, such a community is also always intrinsically *missional*. The doors of the church are always open to any and all of the devil's children who are willing to come in and be reborn. Indeed, as the love of God for the world fueled the Father's sending of the incarnate Son on a mission of salvific love, the church's embodiment of that divine love in the world participates in the triune God's ongoing mission of redemption. Participation in the church's life of love is one of the primary ways the community accepts the risen Lord's commission: "As the Father has sent me, even so send I you" (John 20:21).

That is a hopeful vision indeed. May the God who *is* love pour himself into our hearts by his Spirit, empowering and equipping his children to become lovers in the midst of our dangerous days, even as we await his return. ⊕

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³² Blount, *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh*, 112 (the quote is the book's subtitle). This intramural love, as Hays argues, may not be the *last* word in Christian ethics, but it may well need to be the *first* (Hays, *Moral Vision*, 146).