

1 John 3:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?

Analysis

But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? John provides a practical test of love's genuineness. "Whoso hath this world's good" (hos d' an echē ton bion tou kosmou)—bios (βίος) means life resources, material possessions necessary for living. This addresses those with means, not destitute believers unable to help others.

"And seeth his brother have need" (kai theōrē ton adelphon autou chreian echonta)—the present tense indicates awareness of ongoing need. "And shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him" (kai kleisē ta splagchna autou ap' autou)—splagchna (σπλάγχνα) literally means intestines or internal organs, metaphorically the seat of emotions and compassion. To shut one's bowels is to close one's heart, refusing to feel or act on compassion.

"How dwelleth the love of God in him?" (pōs hē agapē tou theou menei en autō)—the rhetorical question expects the answer "It doesn't." The phrase "love of God" could mean either love for God or God's love dwelling in the person; likely both are implied. One who refuses to help needy brothers demonstrates that neither love for God nor God's love abides within. This echoes James 2:15-16—faith without works is dead. Genuine love produces tangible actions, especially meeting fellow believers' physical needs.

Historical Context

The early church practiced radical generosity. Acts describes believers selling possessions to meet others' needs (Acts 2:44-45, 4:32-37). Paul organized collections from Gentile churches for impoverished Jerusalem believers (Romans 15:26, 2 Corinthians 8-9). This economic sharing demonstrated love's reality and the church's unity across ethnic and geographic boundaries.

The Greco-Roman world had patron-client relationships involving reciprocal obligations, but Christian charity was different—giving without expectation of return, motivated by God's grace, meeting needs regardless of recipients' status. This practical love authenticated the gospel and attracted converts. John's teaching here reflects this early Christian ethic—faith, love, and generosity are inseparable.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. What specific needs of fellow believers are you currently aware of, and how are you responding with tangible help?
2. How can you tell the difference between wise stewardship and shutting up your compassion toward needy brothers?
3. If the genuineness of God's love in you is evidenced by practical generosity, what does your current giving pattern reveal?

Interlinear Text

ὅς	δ'	ἄν	ἔχοντα	τὸν	βίον	τοῦ	κόσμου	καὶ	θεωρῇ
whoso	But		hath		good		this world's	and	seeth
G3739	G1161	G302	G2192	G3588	G979	G3588	G2889	G2532	G2334
τὸν	ἀδελφὸν	αὐτῷ	χρείαν	ἔχοντα	καὶ	κλείσῃ	τὰ		
G3588	brother	him	need	hath	and	shutteth up	G3588		
	G80	G846	G5532	G2192	G2532	G2808			
σπλάγχνα	αὐτῷ	ἀπ'	αὐτῷ	πῶς	ἡ	ἀγάπη	τοῦ		
bowels	him	of compassion from	him	how		the love	G3588		
G4698	G846	G575	G846	G4459	G3588	G26	G3588		
Θεοῦ	μένει	ἐν	αὐτῷ						
of God	dwelleth	in	him						
G2316	G3306	G1722	G846						

Additional Cross-References

Hebrews 13:16 (Good): But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

1 John 4:20 (Love): If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?

Luke 3:11 (Parallel theme): He answereth and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise.

Proverbs 19:17 (Parallel theme): He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the LORD; and that which he hath given will he pay him again.

James 2:15 (Parallel theme): If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food,

Proverbs 28:9 (Parallel theme): He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination.

1 John 5:1 (Love): Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him.

2 Corinthians 8:9 (Parallel theme): For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.

Proverbs 12:10 (Parallel theme): A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast: but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.

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