



**1 John 3:17**  
**Giving is a Christian Obligation**

This morning I want us to go back to some verses we looked at last week. Because back then we looked at a passage from 1 John, Chapter Three and we considered what it means for us to love and to be loved but we focused on primarily on ourselves – what we want out of love.

And yet, the real focus of the passage is actually outward – the whole flow of what John is saying is: Christ did this for you, now you ought to do this for others. So, this morning I want to take some time and talk about what it looks like to show love, especially to those who are in need.

Read with me in your Bibles from 1 John 3:

16 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?

18 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.

19 And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him.

Here's what we need to see this morning: Experiencing the love of God should prompt us to demonstrate the love of God, even when it costs us, because it certainly cost Him. Let me say that again: Experiencing the love of God should prompt us to demonstrate the love of God, even when it costs us, because it certainly cost Him.

And the way John makes the argument is both crystal clear and quite extreme. He's saying look at Jesus – look at His death – He laid down His life in order to satisfy our need. And then, John says, look at the needs of other Christians around you and ask yourself – if God did that for me, how can I turn my heart away from this brother or sister in Christ?

In fact, if you're not concerned about others the Scriptures here go so far as to challenge your self-identity as a Christian. John writes here about Christians who see others in need and react by "shutting up" their hearts – they lock away their emotion and their compassion - slam the door, roll up the window, snap the lock, and turn away. Sorry, I can't help.

You know where else that happened? In the story of the Good Samaritan. Remember, there was a man who was robbed and left for dead, and the first person to pass by after the crime was a priest, but he was busy so he just walked around the man who lay there suffering on the road.

And the next guy to walk past was someone in ministry – someone who worked for the church – actually a Levite, someone whose job was to serve around the Temple. And he did the same thing. Ignored the man in the need as he lay there moaning and bleeding.

After all, getting involved is pretty inconvenient stuff, isn't it?

But finally someone walked by who would help – and he was the last kind of person you'd expect – that was the great shock to the story when Jesus told it. The people who should have cared didn't, and the last person you would expect, the Samaritan, got involved. The whole point of the parable was to encourage us to care, to take action, to go out of our way to help those in need.

And God is asking this of us, the church, those who have already received and experienced His grace in our lives. And that is so critical, I want to shout it and write it in flashing lights all around the walls, whatever it takes to get your attention – Yes, God is calling us to do hard things, but only in response to what He's already done for us, and only with the empowering of the Holy Spirit whom He's given to us!

We do it by His power and through His grace, but the proof of what God has done in us is an outward concern for others. It's easy to be in love with the idea of love and God and religion. It's so easy to get caught up in a state of spiritual joy when you're all by yourself in worship or at home reading or listening to some song or a podcast, but the Bible says that's not the only proof of the true condition of your soul. You also need to look at what you're doing for others. Especially others who are in need.

But that brings us to a very important question – you see, the world is full of people in need, and with technology being what it is today, it's easy for me to see them, even if they're halfway around the world. How am I supposed to respond to so much, and so great of need? I don't have a lot of precise or formulaic answers for you this morning, but I still think this is something God wants us to wrestle with and think through.

So let's start to do that by thinking about *why* people are in need and what God has to say about it. And we can begin by saying this: God doesn't expect us to completely eradicate poverty and suffering within our lifetime. He knows, in ways that many politicians, academics, activists and idealists don't – that on a broken planet full of sinful people, there will always be those who are poor and those who suffer, and often, that will even include those who are Christians.

That's because poverty is rooted in all kinds of things – it can have social, political, or economic factors – big picture things that aren't going to change unless the systems, laws, and structure of society change.

Or, it can have more isolated causes: accidents, illnesses, injuries, simple misfortune, or temporary environmental issues like flooding or drought. These kinds of things can't be legislated against. They just happen.

And then there's the kind of need that is caused by foolishness, laziness, or neglect. A foolish spouse or an addicted parent can destroy and impoverish the entire family. And it's always been this way, ever since sin entered the picture.

The Bible tells us about the Creation of Man in the beginning and the ultimate judgment of Man at the end, and everywhere in between it speaks at times about people who are poor and needy.

Do you know God even gave the Israelites instructions on how to deal with poverty and need *in the Promised Land!* This was the place He was leading them after their time of slavery in Egypt – a land described as flowing with milk and honey where there were going to be vineyards and orchards and room for the flocks to graze, and yet, God still provides all kinds of instruction on how to respond to the financial and material needs of your poor neighbor.

In the book of Deuteronomy for example we find God warning people not to turn their back on the poor, or take advantage of them when they made loans, and He specifically told people not to harvest every last single crop from their fields, but to leave some along the edges and corners so the poor could come and take some for themselves – they had to work to get it, but the owners weren't supposed to be so concerned with maximizing their profit that they stripped every last useable thing out of the fields or off the trees.

How does that Biblical way of doing business line up with today's razor sharp margins where consultants help us maximize efficiency and productivity?

Then think about what happened when Jesus came to earth, He worked all kinds of miracles: He healed people, fed people, even raised people from the dead – but there's only one time I can think of that He ever did anything involving money and that's when He told Peter to go fishing and he would catch a fish with a coin in it's mouth to pay the Temple tax.

Jesus didn't go around blessing people's purses or settling their debts or building new housing developments. He didn't leave behind a big cash inheritance for the disciples or create a trust or endowment for widows and orphans. What do we make of that? I'm not saying He didn't care – not at all – but it seems like He had a different plan. A plan we'll get to in a moment.

First though, let's consider what happened in the early church and with the apostles and disciples. They also didn't seem to think that poverty and need were going to be abolished, even for the people who radically loved and followed Christ. Paul talks about his own times of need and poverty, he talks about taking on a second job so he could continue in the ministry. And one of the most commonly misapplied verses in the Bible appears in the context of Paul talking about his financial difficulties:

**Phil 4:10** But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. 11 Not

that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: 12 I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. 13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Paul didn't have this idea that prosperity was a guarantee for preachers. He said, "it's been hard sometimes, I've wondered where my next meal was going to come from – and it's been easier at other times. I've learned to be cool with both." Hmmm...

The Bible even talks about whole churches that are struggling with poverty and need. The church in Jerusalem for example, and then, at the very end of the Bible, Jesus spoke about the poverty of the persecuted church in Smyrna.

So, here's the point I'm trying to make in all of this: God knew there would be suffering, need, even poverty among His people for as long as we live on this planet with sin.

Until He rebuilds the place and removes everyone who hasn't submitted to Him, there will always be difficulty in this life. God doesn't have this Communist or Socialist idea of the equitable distribution of wealth in a fallen world - He knows it will never work because people are sinful and greedy and they hurt others for their own selfish gain, AND the planet is broken by sin which means disasters and droughts and death strike without warning at times.

But God still cares. The Bible talks about God being the defender of widows and the father to the fatherless (Ps 68:5). That's why He gave all those rules about how to treat the poor in Israel.

Jesus even announced His ministry by quoting from Isaiah and saying:

Luke 4:18 "The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,  
Because He has anointed Me  
To preach the gospel to the poor;  
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to the captives  
And recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;

And later, when the church in Jerusalem heard that God has saved a man like Paul, someone who had persecuted the church radically, and that God was using him to reach the Gentiles – people with no Jewish background – they had to wrestle through what it all meant. And finally they blessed his ministry and told him, to go do whatever God was directing him to do, all they asked was that he would "remember the poor, the very thing which [he] also was eager to do." (Gal 2:10)

All of which brings us to the next point I want to make. God knows about the poor, He cares about them, He's not indifferent, but He's also not going to suddenly wipe out poverty and

all of it's causes (many of which are tied to sin through things like oppression and injustice) until He's completed His work of salvation on the earth.

But He has a plan in the meantime, and this is where you and I come in: He has called His people – those who have received the calling and redemption and love and riches of Christ, to reach out to others.

1 John 3:16 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?

18 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.

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God has ordained that in most cases, His provision should come through His people.

So John is talking here about the moral obligations of those who have the necessities of this life – “this world's goods.” The idea is that you have food, clothing, and shelter – you have them right now and you tend to have them regularly – you're not struggling to get by, wondering where the next meal is coming from.

If that's you, you have an obligation to share what you've got with others who don't.

OK, but that brings us back to our sticky question – it's easy for me to see global poverty today, so where and how am I supposed to get involved?

Well, let's start by noticing what John says – he says whoever “**sees his brother in need.**”

This isn't just a passing glance. The language scholars say the word John used means ‘to look at with interest and purpose’ or to ‘deliberately contemplate’ – it's a verb that speaks of continuous action over a protracted period of time – “it's not a hasty glance. It is seeing a Christian in need of the necessities of life over a long period.”

In other words, I don't think this is talking about the poor person living halfway around the world. I think the idea is more like the story Jesus told about the rich man and the beggar named Lazarus who lived outside his gate. Every day this rich man passed Lazarus and never did anything to help him. But Lazarus found favor with God and the rich man did not and in eternity their circumstances were reversed.

You see, one of the things we watch play out time and time again in Scripture is that God wants us to make an impact on those people who are closest to us. And that has led to me to see a ring of responsibility that radiates outward from my life.

When it comes to giving, my first responsibility is to give to God. And I do that through the local church. This isn't a sermon on tithing, nor is that what is in view here in our passage,

but I just want to state up front, that I think our first obligation is to give TO God THROUGH our local church.

But then, we have an obligation to our family - it's amazing how many of the world's needs play out on a smaller scale in the home. For example: parents have the goods of this world, and children have needs. So according to the old metaphor - you need to teach them to fish, but you also need to give them a fish each night to eat. It's not just one or the other.

And the Bible says we have other familial responsibilities as well. In his first letter to Timothy Paul is writing about the need for the church to help out widows, and he says:

**1 Timothy 5:3** Take care of any widow who has no one else to care for her. **4** But if she has children or grandchildren, their first responsibility is to show godliness at home and repay their parents by taking care of them. This is something that pleases God... **8** But those who won't care for their relatives, especially those in their own household, have denied the true faith. Such people are worse than unbelievers.  
(NLT)

God wants our first line of care to come from those that are closest to us, so love must be practical and lead us to fulfill our responsibilities. One commentator said: "Martyrdom is heroic and exhilarating; the difficulty lies in doing the little things, facing day by day the petty sacrifices and self-denials which no one notices and no one applauds." (Smith quoted in Wuest)

I'll share an example that might seem contradictory at first. Many years ago, before I was a pastor, I know a man who was heavily involved in our local church. He was serving as a leader, was being looked at to become an elder, and he had an adult sister who was mentally disabled. I don't remember how or why it came up, but he told me one day he would like to give more time or money to the church but he couldn't because he was doing so much to take care of his sister - paying her rent, buying her food, taking care of all kinds of other responsibilities. And far from looking down on him for not being more involved in the church, I looked up to him for being so involved with his family.

You see, even though I just said our first obligation is to give to God through the church, I wouldn't ever criticize someone in his shoes. In a special circumstance like that, I think God can redirect our normal patterns. God can keep His church going, it's your heart He's after. And you can't hide that no matter how big or small your check is or who you make it out to.

Now that brings us to our third ring of responsibility. After we give to the church and take care of our family, our obligation is toward other Christians. **17** But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need..." Christians are called to have a special concern for one another, just like members of the same biological family do. Jesus said it like this: (John 13:35) "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

So, we read about the churches in Macedonia and Achaia taking up a collection to help the impoverished church in Jerusalem (Rom 15:26).

Paul encourages Christians in

Gal 6:9 And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. 10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

The whole idea here is that we, as Christians, are all in this together. So, while I wouldn't die for my position on the matter, if I had to choose between giving to a Christian ministry overseas and a local organization that fought poverty but had nothing to do with Christ, I would give to the Christian organization overseas by default.

If you want to support general charities, that's fine. But let's make sure there's no confusion about what we're doing - there are lots of good causes in the world, but are you supporting them *because of Christ*? Are you giving "because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." Or is this group or cause something you would support even if you weren't a Christian? And are you giving to this 'good cause' out of what you would otherwise give to God, or in addition to what you're giving to God? That's just something for you to chew on.

And it begs the question: with so many needs around me, how much am I supposed to give?

Well, I won't give you any specific numbers or percentages, but let me just point you back to what John is saying - Jesus gave His life for us, so we should be willing to help others.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, CS Lewis says we ought to feel our giving, it ought to cause us to lose out in some ways on other things:

[Giving] is an essential part of Christian morality...[though] I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them.<sup>1</sup>

Think about that.

Could it be that God wants you to give instead of having certain things in your life? Could it be that giving is a form of the cross in your life, a vessel of God ordained, can I call it 'suffering' for the sake of others, in the image of His Son and that it's helping you appreciate

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book III, Chapter 3, paragraph 7.

Christ's sacrifice for you even more, keeping you from things that might pull you away from God, and extending encouragement to others as they receive the blessings of your giving?

I can't say for sure, but it's something for you to consider. You see, we should never be entirely comfortable with our giving; we should always be open to God readjusting us. Budgets are a great tool, but they need to be managed with wisdom and compassion and an open heart to God.

Before we close though, let me just point you back to some encouragement, and remind you what you get out of giving.

18 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.  
19 And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him.

Giving brings us at least three things.

1. A greater appreciation of the sacrifice that was made for you. Remember, John says our whole motivation to give is our understanding of what has already been given for us.
2. We receive a greater assurance of our own salvation as you see what you believe affecting what you do. You have evidence in your life of a changed heart and soul for Christ.
3. You have the joy of being a part of God's work in the lives of others. You get to see them rejoice because of what He used you to do.

God is at work in this world – He's at work in you, but then He also wants to be at work through you. Are you experiencing that? Are those around you experiencing that? Does the love of God abide in you? Those are the questions I hope you'll prayerfully consider today.

Let's pray.