



1 John 3:16-23 Is This Love?

Next weekend is Valentine's Day. *Saint* Valentines Day to be exact.

Sorry, I just have to get that in there.

Some critics of religion like to point out how Christians "stole" Christmas from the pagan celebration of Saturnalia – and in many ways, that's true – we took aspects of ungodly celebrations and redeemed them. But the world has also taken many holidays from the church, the Catholic church specifically, and added it's own elements to Christian holidays. So, it flows both ways.

Next weekend people will be celebrating 'love' with hearts, cupids, cards, chocolates, and flowers. You might be excited or completely cynical and totally over it. But let me ask you a question: How do you know what love is? Next Sunday night, if someone asks, "Did you have a good Valentine's day?" How will you determine the answer?

What is love supposed to be like, look like, feel like? Is love something you fall into or stand up for? And how do you know?

Well, this morning we're going to take a look at what the Bible says and what it means for us, and right off the bat we see there's something different here from the Valentine's gifts and all the red and pink decorations at the store.

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.

We get our understanding of love from a lot of different places – advertising, music, poetry and books, chick flicks, the relationships we see unfolding around us - and most of them don't include anything about 'laying down our lives?' Where's the 'Roses are red, Violets are blue'?

But friends – if you really want to know what love is, come here and stare at Christ. Consider Him. Listen to what God says in the Book He's given to you: **"By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us."** Let that roll over in your mind for a bit. Chew on it. Imagine it. Unfold it in your mind.

There's so much that could be said, but let me begin by just enjoying the certainty of it – you can *know* you are loved.

One of the fuels of infatuation is the uncertainty of it all – how did they take that? What did they mean by? Did they like my...? When is he going to reply? Is she going to look over here again? But our passage says “*by this we KNOW love.*” How? By knowing this: Christ died for you. He laid down His life so you could gain something you did not already have.

Friend, as you sit here this morning, God wants you to *know* His love. The word carries with it the idea of something proven - more than just data, more than just facts and figures, this is something you can *know* because you've tested and tried it in your own life. “You know it” as the old saying goes, “like the back of your hand.”

That's important for us to understand because most human beings want to know they are loved. We sense it and express it in different ways, but we all have a deep-seated fear of being alone in this world, a fear of being unwanted, unvalued, unloved. And it's something we never grow out of.

You've seen the look of terror in the eyes of a small child when they've lost their mom and dad and suddenly feel alone. Or what about the heartache and the sincerely felt emotions of the teenager who just wants to fit in – to have friends, and to have someone of the opposite sex pay them a compliment - to be noticed, and to matter to people other than their parents.

What about the person in his or her twenties always going to weddings but never going down the aisle? And if they find themselves in their thirties, or forties and the biological clock is ticking and they're still not connected to someone ‘til death do we part’ what then? How do you adjust to life when you just don't seem to be in the same boat as most of your biological peers?

Of course, if you're in the boat, it's no luxury cruise. There is a season where parents, especially parents of younger children would love to be alone, *for just five minutes!* But the day eventually comes when the kids are all out of the house and you can't get them to call. Maybe they're busy raising their own families, and now you're all alone again, dealing with the same sense of loneliness that you battled as a little boy or girl, longing once again, like that anxious teenager, for some place to fit in, some place to belong – a way to get involved or stay involved in the life that's passing by. After the kids are gone and you're settled into retirement a whole new sense of loneliness can settle back in to your soul – and what if your spouse passes on? What then? There's an especially ugly kind of misery and loneliness that threatens our elders.

Here's what you have to know: loneliness – feeling unloved - is an aching in the soul and it can strike young or old, male or female, educated or simple, pretty or plain, it can even happen to those who are surrounded by other people or stuck in malfunctioning marriages.

It hurts, and it's real. You might make it go away with music, or alcohol, or a hobby or work, or housework, or even by hurting yourself, but it's going to keep coming back until you see, and really understand ["By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us."](#)

The answer, the source, for the love you are looking for – the acceptance and belonging, the companionship you want to find, the affirmation and “atta boy” you so desperately want to hear – is Christ. And you can, and you should, KNOW His love for you. In fact, you know it by this: He laid down His life for you.

What does that mean? It means He who created the world, entered the world. He who ruled in Heaven gave up His seat and the pomp and circumstance of the throne room of God and entered the womb of a human being. He allowed His own creations to hold Him and nurse Him and wipe Him. As fully God and fully man, He experienced hunger and thirst. He grew sweaty and tired. And He never complained. He lived a perfect life and never amassed any wealth, didn't acquire possessions, positions, or titles or land. And then, after a few years of teaching and ministry, He allowed Himself to be betrayed.

He allowed the authorities to arrest Him instead of calling on a legion of angels to come destroy them all. He kept silent as the charges were hurled against Him instead of brilliantly defending Himself and exposing the mockery of it all. He asked for no mercy when it should have been granted - simple Roman citizenship would have saved Him from crucifixion, but here was the King of Heaven and He never invoked His privilege.

Instead, He gave up His beard to be plucked out, His dignity to be spit upon, and His back to be beaten and torn. Then, He who had given up so much already was finally stripped of even His clothes, as His hands and feet were pierced and His body was nailed to the cross like a chunk of meat and there, on that borrowed piece of wood, He who had kept nothing for Himself finally gave up His life.

And according to the Scriptures, [By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us.](#)

Let me tell you what this means.

It means, the more we understand Christ, the more we understand love. Here's the absolute truth: a Christian is able to have a deeper, more true, more full experience of love than anyone who does not know Christ *because* the Christian has access to the true definition of the word. In fact, if you are a Christian you have already experienced more love than any other person who walks the face of the earth, no matter how many or how intense of romantic relationships they may have.

I say that again because it's so easy to miss: if you are a Christian, by that very definition, you already possess a greater quality and quantity of love than any person who does not know Christ, and for all your longing for some sort of emotional experience with another human being – whether that be a friend, child, sibling, or spouse - the truth is, you will never really know more love than you have already experienced and possessed in Christ.

You might not understand it, you might not appreciate it, but you already possess the truest, deepest, strongest love in the universe – and it was given to you by God.

16 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us.

These are simple words, but they carry a profound truth. Christ has demonstrated God's love for you. He doesn't just whisper it or write it in a card – He actually demonstrated love by laying down His life for you. It's not even a promise of something He'll do in the future – it's an event that has already occurred in the past. He's already demonstrated His love!

So, let's make this really practical and hopefully therapeutically painful since this is the church, not a Hallmark store. And we'll do that by asking: if you have Christ in your life, what more are you searching for?

Do you want to be found lovely? Do you want to be pursued? Do you want to be esteemed or affirmed? Do you want someone with you so that you are not alone?

Do you understand Christ has done all of that for you? That He has come to you. That He doesn't ask you to impress Him, and in fact, you can't? That He sees through your physical appearance. That He is patient with you, wants to hear you, wants to spend time with you? That He wants to tell you "well done" and be your affirmation.

But if you can't be content with Christ alone, what more are you looking for? Now, certainly you don't put it in those terms – but Christian, and I am speaking to Christians here – if you have the love of God and that is not enough for you, where else can you go? Will you go to another human being and ask them to do what God Himself could not? Will you go to another human being – male or female, adult or child and expect them to fill up the longings of your soul?

If so, put yourself in the shoes of the other person – does that come across a wee bit needy to you? Almighty GOD didn't satisfy the person standing across from you – do you feel bold enough to step up and see how things go with you instead, want to see if you can do better than God? Of course not.

Friend, don't ask another human being to be for you what only God can be. Don't ask them to do things for you that only God can do. If you want to know love – know this: [He laid down His life for us.](#)

Because in showing us love, God wants us to see that our primary focus should be receiving love from Him first and then demonstrating that love to others – notice the rest of the verse:

[And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren.](#)

God wants us to have interaction with other human beings. After all, He's the One who created Adam and said, ["It's not good for Him to be alone, I will make him a helper](#)

comparable to him.” (Gen 2:18) It’s God who calls us into community, into fellowship, into family. BUT, our horizontal relationships should always happen in the shadow of our vertical relationship.

In fact, it’s not just that they should, the Scripture here says that they “ought” to: “**we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren.**”

This is intentionally prescriptive, it’s normative, it’s a moral, even a legal obligation. Christ’s love for us is not just something to be admired like a work of art; it’s an example for us to follow. We’re to attempt to walk in His footsteps and imitate our Lord.

But we need to understand love on God’s terms – that it always involves actions and not just emotions, and *then* we are to share it with others. We act on the basis of what we have already received and known. That’s an important order.

But here’s what is crazy: choice is still involved. This kind of love is not scientific, it’s not repeatable and observable because it’s not automatic, it’s not guaranteed. It’s possible that I might not show it. I ought to, but I might not.

Jesus told a parable about a servant who was unaffected by the mercy he had been shown:

Matt 18: 21 Then Peter came to Him and said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”

22 Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. 23 Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 25 But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. 26 The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ 27 Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

28 “But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took *him* by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ 29 So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ 30 And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. 31 So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. 32 Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. 33 Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’ 34 And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

35 "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

What should we learn from all of that? Simply this: it's possible, all too possible, for us to experience God's grace and mercy in our own lives and just squirrel it away for our private enjoyment without letting it affect our relationships with others. It can even happen in entire churches – look at Paul's letters to the Corinthians if you need proof. But that's not what is supposed to happen. It's why the parable Jesus told makes so much sense – it's not hard to understand – if we have received kindness, forgiveness, grace, love – then we should be compelled to show it to others.

In a sense, we must be willing to be crucified for others – not in an atoning way, but in glad service and willing imitation of our Lord. That's how far He went for us.

So, how far are you willing to go for others? That's a personal question, and there is much that could be said to add nuance and subtlety to each situation, but consider Christ – how far did He go to demonstrate love for you? Now, how far are you willing to go to show love for others?

Listen to the words of Scripture again this morning:

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?

The instruction is - after we know the love God has shown for us, we are to endeavor to show that love to "the brethren" - our demonstrations of love are not reserved only for the people who give us goose bumps. We're to show sacrificial, Christ-imitating love to "the brethren" – in other words to other Christians. And if we don't, John asks the question – how does the love of God abide in you?

C. S. Lewis once said: "it is easier to be enthusiastic about humanity with a capital "H" than it is to love individual men and women, especially those who are uninteresting, ... exasperating, depraved, or otherwise unattractive. Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular."

But loving people in particular is important; in fact, John is about to go on to say that the love we show to others serves as evidence of the change that God has wrought in our souls.

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.

There may come moments when you doubt your salvation, when you're not sure if all this is real. And when those moments come, John says, look back on the love you have

experienced from Christ and the things it has motivated you to do and reassure your heart. He's already told us in vs 14:

14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren.

So when your heart begins to wander and wonder, just point it back to what you've already seen, experienced, and done.

20 For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things.

21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God.

Oh, and one more important thing: you're not expected to do this on your own. Not only does God provide the example and experience of love for us, He knows that we're going to need some help in demonstrating it to others, so He tells us to ask Him for that help in prayer and He'll provide the strength, the wisdom, the resources, the patience that we need to love. It might not be easy or fun or instant, but He promises that if we are doing His work, He'll also give us His Spirit and His tools for the job.

22 And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.

And just to clarify about that commandment thing – we've got one more verse to look at this morning:

23 And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.

We've already noticed that John tends to repeat himself a lot in this short book. But he's not a broken record – he's more like a spiral staircase, always moving around and around the center pole, but going a little higher time. John keeps bringing us back to these themes of love and obedience and showing us that there are only two sides spiritually – challenging us to determine – which side are we on?

The answer, of course is found by examining our lives and seeing – have we known the love of Christ – not just intellectually but experientially. Has it had an impact on us? Do we trust in it? Does it sustain us? Is it fulfilling to us?

And how is God's love affecting our relationships with others? Are we looking to them to be what only God can and should be for us? Or are we compelled to act differently – sacrificially toward others?

Those are questions for you to ponder as we are reminded in yet another way of the love of Christ this morning – and that is by receiving communion – the ushers will come forward in just a minute and put in your hands a tangible reminder of the love that God has shown for you. Ponder it. Reflect on it. Listen as it speaks to you. The bread and the cup are telling you God loves you and encouraging you to love others.

(NLT) Romans 5:6 When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. 7 Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. 8 But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. 9 And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. 10 For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. 11 So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.