

From Death to Life I John 3:11-24 S 9

A passenger aboard Air Florida Flight 90, which crashed on take-off in Washington, D.C. on January 13, 1982, killing 78 people, was among the six people to initially survive the crash. His actions after the crash became a well-known example of extraordinary heroism. He did not know any of the other victims personally. In fact, his identity was not even known until some time later.

“He was one of six survivors clinging to twisted wreckage bobbing in the icy Potomac when the first helicopter arrived. He seemed the most alert. Life vests were dropped, then a flotation ball. The man passed them to the others. Twice the man handed away a life line that could have dragged him to safety.

The helicopter crew - who rescued the only 5 persons who survived from the jetliner, lifted a woman to the riverbank, and then dragged 3 more across the ice to safety. Then the life line saved a woman who was trying to swim away from the sinking wreckage. When the helicopter returned, the man was gone.

The passenger who had survived the crash and had repeatedly given up the rescue lines to other survivors before drowning was later identified as a 46-year-old bank examiner from the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, Arland D. Williams Jr. The coroner determined that Williams was the only passenger recovered from the river whose body revealed that he had died from drowning rather than impact injuries suffered in the crash. Arland Williams was from Mattoon, IL, and an elementary school is named for after him.

As great as the sacrifice of Arland Williams was, there is one greater still! **Verse 16** from our scripture text tells us: “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 & sisters.” Further more we know, “Jesus himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” (I Pet. 2:24)

The example of Arland & even more, Jesus, is in contrast to the fruit, the destructive passions of the devil. As you can see from the sermon insert, John shows us the difference. It's pointed out to us that the test of Christian love is not simply failure to do evil to others. Love also involves doing them good. Christian love is positive & negative.

"Cease to do evil; learn to do well," the prophet Isaiah tells us (1:16-17). Love is not hurting, harming others. It's also readiness to look out for the good of other people including being prepared to give up one's life or part of one's life so that others may experience the abundant life the Bible talks about so much. Love means saying no to one's own life so that another may live.

Notice, the love of Christ goes far beyond feelings and it's much deeper than words. Feelings will often play a part in love, but they are never the whole picture. We were not saved by God's feelings. We are rescued by the sacrificial, committed, blood-soaked struggle of God's love in action. The love of Jesus is displayed in the vulnerability, humility, and obedience at the cross. It is not a passive love. At Calvary, Jesus ran headlong into the war, engaged intensely with all that stood in His path. It was really evil, plus your and my sins that were part of that war.

Words like grace, mercy and love can sound so warm & carefree in certain contexts. But there is nothing soft or fluffy about them at the cross. There is blood on the battlefield and a tremendously painful cost in His act of submission and obedience. The love of Jesus is not just tender affection or heart-warming

sympathy. It is not always the softened, warm fuzzy picture we might see on Christmas cards. This is a bold and brave love, journeying into the thick of the fight against the devil, to rescue you and me, the objects of its affection. During the deep surrender of the cross, Jesus fights the good fight. He was determinedly devoted to His Father & loving all of humankind with every labored breath.

Real love is not just a feeling. It's not harming others. It's action of selfless sacrificial service. Christ did not simply talk about love, He proved it. God's love is full of cries of anguish, blood, sweat & tears. Jesus suffered for us. He fights for us and with us. He willingly laid down His life. Self-preservation is a law of physical life. Self-sacrifice is the way of spiritual life. How might focusing more on the actions rather than the feelings of love change the way we think about love?

The next illustration about how to love, in contrast to the evil one, that John gives us is **verse 17**. "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in him?" Now the Bible is meddling with us!

The oldest joke about preachers is when they begin to deal with our true bad habits & sins. She or he has stopped telling pleasant and comforting stories, or enjoyable convicting stories about the sins we don't commit, and started interfering with our lives. Preaching is O.K. so long as it teaches us facts about the persons & history connected to the Bible and religion in general. Many people are of the opinion that preaching is acceptable so long as it affirms their hope they will go to heaven and the belief that their God is a loving and merciful being.

But preaching becomes meddling and downright offensive when it makes a negative judgment and pokes around in my sinful bad

behavior or lack of spiritual growth. For example, and you could pick any issue. A preacher preached against liquor. The members nodded their heads vigorously & some said, "Amen." He preached against gambling, & they nodded their heads vigorously. Some said, "Amen." Then he preached against gossiping. There was dead silence, until one person was heard whispering "Now, he's stopped preaching, and gone to meddling!"

This verse about sharing our God given wealth, as God would have us share it – is meddling. It's so easy to come up with reasons not to share. But a sign of loving, laying down our lives for others, is helping those in need. And, in the mouth of a mature Christian, "I didn't do anything," can be an admission of guilt. For, when one has the ability to help brothers and sisters in Christ, but not do anything - is to do wrong.

More than one person has calculated that if everyone in North America who calls themselves Christians, would fully tithe, we would have enough to support missions of all types, our churches, and solve the world's hunger issues. I've often said, one measurement we can use is, "Do we give more than we spend in entertainment?" This includes movies, meals, vacations, sports, and so on.

Verse 18 is a good summary of this section. "Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth." To "love in word" means to talk about a need. To love in deed means to do something about meeting it. To love in truth means to genuinely love a person with the heart and not just the tongue. Genuine love is practical, visible and active. It comes with concrete actions and clear helpful words. According to John, love is a verb, not a noun. It loses much of its meaning when reduced to sentimentality and stops at emotions.

A book on the care of relatives stricken by Alzheimer's disease is named – The 36 Hour Day. "The thing that gets to you," said a family member caring for his father, is being on duty - 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with no time off for good behavior."

A lady caring for her mother, was asked if she could turn to her church family for help. She replied: "A number of people assure me of their prayers. Occasionally someone says, 'Let me know if I can do anything.' What really makes a difference is the friend who shows up on Saturday to stay with Mom and gives me the day off."

The willingness and commitment to care, in word and deed, is the most underrated talent God gives us. Caring, loving and nurturing have value that transcends the high-profile talents that put people in the spotlight.

Verse 19. "When we love others, we know that we belong to the truth, and we feel at ease in the presence of God." We hear words of assurance. We have a summary of what we've been taught. But we also have a way to know if we are believing and doing as God desires. This assurance gives us confidence that we are abiding children of God.

It's easy to doubt this religion stuff. It's not unusual to wonder at times – how true is this message about Jesus? Is the mystery of faith worth it? But John is telling us, if we love God and love people, and we see it in our selves with our own lives, we can trust our knowledge and the faith we have.

Someone once said that some Christians have just enough religion to make them miserable: too much to be happy at dances and too little to be happy at prayer meeting. The idea is we all straddle the fence some, when it comes to the world. But are we being guided by the world or by God and His Word? Are we

listening to God more than we are the world? The only way we can know for sure is by listening to God, abiding, walking with Him, believing that Jesus is who the Bible says he is, and allowing the Holy Spirit to lead us in the way of God's love. In short, we see ourselves - and then we know we know.

John offers us hope when we have doubts and fears about our salvation and our faith. **Verses 20 and 21.** "If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friend, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God."

The Greek word for condemn here is made up of two words which mean: "against," and "to know." So literally the word means to "know against myself." This suggests self-condemnation more than objective condemnation. It means to pass judgement upon or against myself. Often we are too hard on our selves. No Christian should treat sin lightly, but no follower of Jesus should be harder on them self than God is. There is a morbid kind of self-examination & self-condemnation that is not spiritual. Nor is making light of sin.

But we are told. God knows us, so we have confidence in front of God. John is simply telling us – don't beat ourselves up. And don't let our feelings or guilt get in the way of God's love. Our actions & our relationship with God are not qualified or disqualified by our own assessment of them. There is an objective ground that stands beneath the subjective perception, and that ground is God's assessment and decision.

John understands our humanity. We often second guess our purity. We often have regrets – we could have done better. But here he goes out of his way to assure us – We can know we know Jesus. And God is the

final judge who knows our intentions and hearts & the quality and quantity of our love.

William Barclay says it this way. “Our hearts condemn us – that is inevitable. But God is greater than our hearts; he knows all things. Not only does he know our sins; he also knows our love, our longings, the nobility that never fully works itself out, our penitence and the greatness of Jesus’ knowledge gives him the sympathy that can understand and forgive.” Or to put it another way, Thomas a Kempis tells us, “We see the deed but God knows the intention.”

This logic takes us a step further. **Verse 22** teaches that confidence gained in God, helps us pray. “And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.”

Did we ever realize that loving one another is a prerequisite to answered prayer? Because we keep His commandment to believe, love, and act as God would have us to, we receive whatever we ask from Him. Kneeling before God in boldness gives assurance that when we pray we will receive what we pray for.

But note the phrase, whatever we ask. When we love God, keep His commandments and walk in His will, His will & our will become perfectly blended together. Prayer is not a magic lamp. It is the offering up of God’s will through the yielded follower of Jesus.

James Gilmour, a missionary to Mongolia, was once asked to treat some wounded soldiers. He was not a doctor, but he did have some knowledge of first aid. He dressed the wounds of two of the men, but a third had a badly broken thigh bone. Gilmour didn’t know what to do, so he knelt beside the man and prayed for help, confident that God would answer.

As he pondered what to do next, a crowd of beggars came by asking for money. Gilmour was preoccupied with the wounded soldier, yet his heart went out to those ragged paupers. Hurriedly he gave them a little money and a few words of loving concern.

A moment later he stared in amazement at one weary beggar who had remained behind. The starving man was little more than a living skeleton. The missionary suddenly realized that the Lord had brought him a walking lesson in human anatomy.

Gilmour asked the man if he might examine him. Carefully he traced his fingers over the area corresponding to the broken bones of the soldier. He was then able to go to the wounded man and set his fracture. Years afterward, Gilmour often told of this as God’s strange but wonderful answer to prayer.

The first part of First John ends by circling back to the two greatest commandments and more words of assurance. **Verse 23**. “This is God’s commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.”

The Greek word for believe here is in the past tense, noting a once-for-all event involving faith, trust and commitment. Belief and love go together. The proof of belief is continuing to love one another. Without the right belief in Jesus love will be absent.

The final verse in the third chapter teaches us the assurance that comes from abiding in God’s Word and in God’s Spirit. This is a bridge to chapter 4 that we will pick up in January. “The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.” Let’s rejoice in this wonderful word of assurance.