

HOPE FOR THE POOR

THE GOSPEL, HOPE, AND THE WORLD

[DR. TIMOTHY KELLER | Sermon transcript, 4 October 2009]

1 John 3:1-3, 14-20 – How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.

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. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

The series we are in right now is meant to give us an opportunity to revisit our calling as a church. It is to look at our vision and renew our vision—what are we here to do?

What we are going to do in these next few weeks is to look at the concept of *hope*. The Christian gospel creates hope. You say, “Hope for what?” Hope for a number of things. As we see all the things that the gospel creates hope for, we will actually have a greater picture of how we are supposed to be living in the world, and how we as a church are supposed to be working and living in the city.

1 John 3:17–18 makes a very interesting statement about the importance of loving in action and deed. It says, “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words...but with actions and in truth.” Some translations say, “Let us not just love in word but in deed and in truth.”

We are being told that when you see someone in need—someone without power or material possessions, someone poor, needy, marginalized—you who have more power, possessions, know-how, and money are to share with them. John says that is what it means to love in action. *Practical love*—to love not just in word but in deed.

Now, there are churches where almost the only thing they do is to love in deed, because they are not sure about truth: “Truth is kind of a hard, slippery thing, and who knows what the truth is, so we are just going to make the world a better place.” And then there are other kinds of churches that feel very confident about the truth, and they say, “We know what the truth is,” and they call people to conversion and instruct people in the truth. Very often they don’t do ministry in deed; they only do ministry in word.

We want to be one of the churches that understand that the Bible calls us to minister in word *and* deed in the city, and that those two things are linked. If we are going to understand what that is, what it means to be a church like that, we need to see what this passage teaches us about this kind of ministry. We learn three things. We learn that deed ministry—helping the poor, the marginal, the elderly, widows, orphans, single parent families, the chronically ill, helping all these sorts of people and really sacrificing for them—is crucial to the *mission* God gives us. It is a *sign* that we belong to Jesus, and it requires a peculiar, particular kind of *power*.

THE MISSION GOD GIVES US

I just read the passage that says if you have material possessions and you see a brother without them and you do not help, how can the love of Christ dwell in you? You should be reaching out to others. Many commentators over the years have noticed that this passage in 1 John is actually a restatement of Deuteronomy 15:7–8: “If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land...do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely give him whatever he needs.”

John is essentially just restating what it says in Deuteronomy, but that is significant, and here is why. In Deuteronomy 4:5–8, Moses explains why it is so important for believers to care for the poor. He says, “I have taught you decrees and laws. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom to the nations and the nations will say, ‘What other nation is so great [to have such a God!]’”

Moses is saying that one of the reasons we ought to care for the immigrant, for the marginal, for the oppressed and the poor is because it pleases God. Obviously that is the most important reason. But that is not the only reason. Moses says you have a mission, and your mission, he says to Israel, is to show the nations, the non-believing people, who God is. And one of the ways you show who God is, is by being a society of justice.

How does that work? When God got the Israelites together at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19, he said to them, “I want you to be a kingdom of priests for me” (v. 6). *A whole kingdom of priests*. That is weird; why did God say, “You are all priests”? They don’t all work in the tabernacle, do they? No, but priests are the people who stand in the gap between you and God, and they bridge the gap. Prophets also stood in the gap, but they came to thunder God’s Word. But priests were people of sympathy and service. Priests took care of the poor. And therefore, the purpose of a nation of priests is actually to bridge the gap between the world and God by *showing* them who God is through their care for the poor.

Essentially this is saying that people who don’t believe ought to look at how you relate to people who don’t have power, don’t have money, don’t have possessions, while you have more—and if they see you giving yourself away, giving your goods away, giving your power and your convenience and your privacy away for them generously and in sacrificial proportions, then the nations will look at you and say, “Wow! What is going on there?”

You say, “But that is the Old Testament. That is Deuteronomy.” Yes, but here is 1 Peter 2. Peter is writing to a Christian church, and listen to what he says to you: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (v. 9). “Holy” means set apart, separate. You are a counterculture—Why? “That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” And then Peter goes on and says: “Friends, live such good lives among the nations that, though they accuse you of wrongdoing, they will see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (v. 11–12).

This is absolutely *crucial*, not to just please God but to show the world, the nations, who you are. The nations are supposed to look at us and say, “Wow!” because of the way in which we react to people with less.

Somebody is going to point out that John says, “If you see a *brother* in need and you have no pity on him and don’t share your goods and your funds with him, how can the love of God be in him?” (v. 17, paraphrased). Brother or sister means another Christian, right? This is saying we should take care of poor *Christians*, isn’t it? Yes it is, but that is not the only thing the New Testament says.

Galatians 6:10 hits it just right. Paul is writing to the Galatian Christians, and he says, “Do good to all, but especially the family of faith.” Your brothers and sisters in Christ—the people who are sitting near you who are Christians—they are your brothers and sisters. This is not just an aggregation. This is a family. How do you relate to your family practically? Many of you have siblings; many of you have brothers and sisters that you don’t like, but guess what? They are still your brothers and sisters, and when they have a problem, you go to them, and you do things, and you lend them money (and you never get it back). But that is because they are your siblings. And therefore Paul is right in saying do good to all, but especially to the family of faith.

In Luke 10, the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus says very forcefully that if you only give your money—if you only take care of and reach out to help people who believe like you and are just like you—the nations will not be amazed.¹ This does work, by the way. That is why the last Roman Emperor, Julian, who was a pagan and not a Christian, was very irritated by how Christianity was spreading all through the Roman Empire. People were becoming Christians in droves. He wrote, “The impious Galileans [i.e., Christians] support not only their poor, but ours as well; everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.”²

Do you know what he is saying? Everybody takes care of their own, but Christians took care of everybody’s poor. And as a result, the nations took notice.

Historians will tell you that when Christianity was still a minority religion, no more than ten percent of the population, every town had a local bishop or Christian leader, and because the Christians cared for everybody, especially the people at the bottom rung of the ladder, it was the Christian leaders in every town who had the moral authority to speak for the whole population. They were seen as the leaders of the whole town (more so than the local civil magistrates), even by the non-Christians. Why? Because they did this. And therefore deed ministry, not just word ministry, is crucial to our mission to show the world who God is.³

A SIGN THAT YOU BELONG TO JESUS

As important as that is, the second thing we are told is this kind of ministry is a *sign* that you belong to Jesus himself. Here we are not looking at what the rest of the Bible says about deed ministry; we are looking at what 1 John says. This epistle is dealing with a problem. There had been a group of people in the church John was writing to that had left the faith. They had just picked up and left, and this raised a lot of questions

In 1 John 2:19, John says, “Beloved, they went out from us, but they were not of us. For if they had been of us, they would have continued with us.” Here is the question he was dealing with: People were saying, “If you can be a baptized Christian, like these folks were, and still in the end not belong to Jesus, how do we know who is a real Christian? How can we know that we are really united to Christ, that we really have the Holy Spirit regenerating our heart, and that we have passed from death to life? How do we know we really know him in our innermost being—in reality—and are not just living a life of outward conformity?”

John actually gives three answers, three tests. I have to at least mention the first two, even though what I am most concerned about is the third test.

1. In the parable, a non-Jew takes care of a Jew while Jewish passers-by ignore him.

2. Quoted in Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 84.

3. Another way to say this is that because the effects of the fall are comprehensive the extent of our mission of redemption must be equally comprehensive. Because everything is broken everything must be healed. We are agents of healing, carrying the healing balm of redemption to the nations.

The first test I will call the *truth* test. 1 John 4:2 says “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” How do you know the Holy Spirit is in you? The Holy Spirit will lead you to say Jesus is the Son of God incarnate in flesh. Here is what John is getting at. I have had many people say things like this in New York City: “I like to think of Jesus not as the Son of God from heaven who came to earth to die to appease the wrath of God. I like to think of Jesus as a good man who is a moral teacher and an excellent moral example. And I consider myself a Christian.” John is saying maybe you consider yourself a Christian, but you don’t *know* him.

You say, “That is so narrow and fundamentalist. You mean you have to believe a certain way?” That is not narrow—it is actually the Golden Rule. You are doing to Jesus what you wouldn’t want anybody to do to you. Imagine you have a family and you have children, and somebody comes to you and says, “I like to think of you as a terrible parent. I like to think of you as a person who just lets your kids run wild. You never discipline your children.”

You say, “With all due respect, most people think I am too strict with my kids.”

Your friend says, “That doesn’t matter. I like to think of you as a person who lets your kids run wild. That is how I want to think of you. And I have the right to think what I want!”

What would you say? You would say, “Sure, you have the right. I mean, nobody is going to fine you or put you in jail, but our relationship is over, because if you want to relate to me as you want to think I am instead of who I really am, we don’t have a relationship. You don’t *know* me.” To say, “I want to think about Jesus as...” No! You have to *know Jesus as he reveals himself in the Word of God*, the Scripture, or else you don’t know him. That is the truth test.

The second test is the *obedience* test. There is another place where John says, “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The [one] who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar” (1 John 2:3–4).

Here is why the obedience test works. How do you know if you really know somebody personally? If someone says, “I know that person personally, and I am very close to them, and we spend a lot of time together”—if that is the case, then they would not do things that constantly make that person weep, constantly grieve that person, constantly dishonor that person, that contradict everything this person stands for and wants and loves and lives for, right?

If you say, “I am a Christian, but I know there are some things I am doing that are wrong, but I am still a Christian” (you may be, by the way, because Christians are inconsistent—you are saved by grace and not by works), yet at that moment you can’t *know* that you know him. Here is why. If you really knew Jesus—not just knew about him but *knew* him—you could not be doing things day in and day out that make him weep, that go against everything he stands for. You can’t say, “I know Jesus doesn’t want me to do that, but I am doing it anyway.” You don’t *know* him then! Or at the very least you can’t know that you know him.

Taking those two tests by themselves, is that enough? No, because, frankly, you still can be a self-righteous Pharisee—get all the doctrine down and follow all the rules.

The third test is the *love* test. You see it in verse 14. This is the theme of John: “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers.” You say, “This one I like. The obedience thing and the truth thing, they are a lot harder. I like this one.”

Not so fast! Because on he goes and says in verse 16, “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.” And then it says, “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? . . . let us not love with words . . . but with actions.”

Do you know what John is saying? People use the word “love” for all kinds of stuff: I *love* my home. I *love* the ocean. Those are loves, let’s admit it. Let’s not be narrow and say, “We define love like...” No, they are all loves. But let’s talk about *Christian love*. How do you know you know Christ’s love?

Here is what John says. *Christ’s love is sacrificial action*. It is not sentiment. It is not even feeling—it is sacrificial action. In fact, sometimes, if you sacrifice your good and your convenience and your comfort and your privacy and your money for somebody else—even if you don’t like them, even if you don’t feel anything—in some ways that is more loving than if you like them, because it is a bigger sacrifice.

And if you’ve known Jesus Christ’s dying love—his love was sacrificial action—if you know that, then that will be reflected in your life with others. You won’t be too busy. You won’t be too selfish. You won’t be too indifferent. You won’t be too self-centered. You will give. The nations will see what you are doing. The people around will see how incredibly generous you are, how much you have given up, how open you are, how vulnerable you make yourself, how passionate you are about helping people with needs, and they will wonder at the God you serve who can change hearts like yours. Why? Because that is the mark, the last of the three signs—sacrificial action. A life poured out in deeds of sacrificial action to the poor and to other people with needs is the inevitable mark, the sign, that you *know* him, and it is your way of *knowing* that you know him.

A PECULIAR, PARTICULAR KIND OF POWER

Do you see how important this is? We have raised the bar pretty high, haven’t we? So where do we get the power to do this? That is our final point, and the final thing we learn here.

The place where John says it is not enough to just love in word, but you have to love in deed—it is not just enough to have feelings of compassion for people; when you see somebody with less of the world’s goods, there must be sacrificial action in which you divest yourself to some degree and give to others—that is in the middle of the chapter. But at the end and at the beginning, we see the motivation for the kind of ministry that won’t work and the motivation that will work.

That is where you get the power: stay away from the motivation that won’t work, and go to the motivation that will work.

What is the motivation that won’t work? It is *guilt*. What will never work in reaching out to people with needs as a motivation is guilt. There might be a burst at first, but eventually you will get exhausted. Look at how the passage ends. It is kind of a puzzle, I must admit. Commentators still puzzle over this, but right after John says people have to love in deed, and you must help the poor, then immediately after that, in verses 19–20, he says, “This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts.”

Look at how curious this is. John is saying you have to love your brothers and sisters. You have to lay down your life for them. If you have experienced the sacrificial action of Jesus Christ dying for you, you will be sacrificially active toward people. You need to help the poor; you need to reach out to them. And when your hearts condemn you, remember that God is greater than your heart. *What?* Why would he suddenly bring up your heart condemning you—guilt?

Here is why, I think. There is a lot of speculation, but this is what I think is happening. If you get involved with the needs of other people—if you really begin to involve yourself and your motivation isn’t right, and it almost never is to start—there will be trouble, unless you are a thoughtless person, and in that case there won’t be. But if you are a thoughtful person, let me tell you what is going to happen.

If you are trying to love other people in order to feel lovable yourself, if you are reaching out to others so you can say, “Look at what a good person I am; I am a noble person; I am a caring person” (and let’s be honest

about this, nobody is really admitting this to themselves), if the reason you are reaching out to others and being involved in charitable actions is so you can say, “Now I know I am a good person”—if you are trying to be lovable, to convince yourself you are lovable, and even to convince God that you are lovable by loving other people, it is a swamp. It is quicksand. You will find that your heart will start to condemn you, because you will realize you have never done enough. You can’t do enough.

Do you remember what happened at the end of the movie *Schindler’s List*? Oskar Schindler was a German businessman, a wealthy man, during World War II, and his conscience began to trouble him. He began to bribe Nazi officials with his money in order to save Jewish lives. He did a wonderful job—that is why there is a movie about him—and he saved hundreds, maybe thousands of Jewish lives by giving his money away to bribe the Nazi officials. But at the end of the movie, it is the end of World War II and he has to run for his life because the Allies are coming. All the people whose lives he saved are around him being grateful and trying to say, “Thank you.” But that is not how he feels. He does not feel good. What happens? His heart condemns him. He falls to his knees. He looks to his watch and says, “Why did I keep this when I could have sold it? I could have saved another life. What about the car? I could have saved five lives. I haven’t done enough!” They are all saying he is being too hard on himself. But guess what? He is right.

In fact, I would like you to look at yourself. When you start to get involved, when you start to really look at the hungry people and the oppressed people, when you look at the suffering people out there, unless you are thoughtless, your heart is going to condemn you. Do you know why? Your last vacation, you didn’t have to take it, or you didn’t have to go to that place. What about the last piece of clothing? Did you really have to buy that? You could have saved somebody’s life with that money.

You say, “You are being...” No, I am not! Unless you are thoughtless, your heart will start to condemn you. Guilt will never work. Do you know why? Because we *are* guilty. It is like Lady Macbeth: “Out, damned spot!” She kept washing and washing her hands to try to get rid of the blood on her hands.

Now, I am sorry, but we are privileged. We have got a lot. We give some away, and we start to feel good about ourselves, but unless you are thoughtless, you will start to be like Oskar Schindler. Your heart will condemn you, and you will know: “I could have saved somebody else.” And, therefore, guilt is not going to work as a motivation, because guilt will eventually strangle you. You will just have to turn away.

So what is the motivation that will work? It is at the top of the chapter. It is *love*, of course. Look carefully: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (v. 1). The commentators will tell you that John has been writing a nice, normal kind of controlled prose, and suddenly, right here, there are sentence fragments and orphan verbs, because he is having a burst of emotion. The first word isn’t even in the NIV translation. The first Greek word is “Look! Behold!” The old King James gets it: “Behold, what manner of love the Father has given unto us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.”

“That is what we are” gets across the fact that there is just one, single, orphan, lone verb there. It is the plural of the verb “to be.” Basically what he is saying is, “Look! What unearthly love! What incredible love that God would adopt us. He is not just our King—he is our Father!”

How sure is a little child that no matter how much they scream and cry and misbehave, their father or mother is going to take care of them? They should be pretty sure. And that is the kind of love that we have. We have been adopted. And then John says, “And that is what we are,” which is just another way of saying, “We are! We are!” Do you know what is happening? He is *knowing Christ* right before our eyes.

Do you know what it means to really *know* Christ, and not just know about him? It is when the things that you know about him become real. Bernard of Clairvaux has that great hymn, “Jesus the Very Thought of Thee.”

One of the verses goes: “When once Thou visitest the heart, / Then truth begins to shine, / Then earthy vanities depart, / Then kindles love divine.”

The truth begins to shine. Here is how you know you know Christ, and here is how your life is changed so that the dying love of Christ actually affects the way in which you live, and motivates you, not out of guilt—not out of emptiness, not out of trying to fill up your cup—but through the overflow of a full cup. When you are reading or you are thinking or you are praying about something that you already know, the truth suddenly jumps off the page, dazzles your eyes, grabs you by the heart—the love is so great it almost hurts.

That is the reason why John can go on and say, “Dear friends, we are now children of God.” If even these experiences of the truth beginning to shine are so powerful and transforming, what will it be like to actually see him? “We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (v. 1–2). When we see him as he is, all the stuff about ourselves that we hate will just burn off. We will finally be ourselves. We will finally be perfect. We will finally be glorious.

And then it says, “Everyone who has this *hope* in him purifies himself, just as he is pure” (v. 3). Do you know what it is saying? To even hope for this—to sometimes feel his love, his dying love on your heart, and to hope for, even *want* the day to come when that dying love so completely transforms you that you are perfect—to even *want* that changes you now (the word “purify” is the word for “holy”). That’s what will make you like Jesus now, to purify yourself “as he is pure.” To even long for that, to know his love, turns you into somebody who does what he does.

Here is how you deal with a condemning heart, a guilty heart. You say, “Heart, you are trying to condemn me. But there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus [Rom. 8:1], because Jesus was condemned for me.” Here is what he did: though he was rich, he became poor. He was born in a feed trough; he was raised in a poor family; and he said, “Foxes have holes, and birds...have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20).

At the end of his life, he rode into town on a borrowed donkey, and he ate his last meal in a borrowed room, and he was buried in a borrowed tomb, and the only possession he had left at the end (his robe), they cast lots for. Oskar Schindler knew that he could have done more to save people, but Jesus couldn’t have done more. He did it all. And because of that, there is no condemnation for you.

Every so often you have got to say, “Behold!” You have got to see it. You have got to know it. And when you do that, here is what is going to happen. You will never be able to look at poor people the same way again. You will never be able to look at yourself the same way again.

The love of Christ will push you out there to treat them the way he treated you. And the world will say, “Wow!”

Let’s pray.

Give us a taste of your love as we taste the bread and the cup so that we can become more like your Son, who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

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