

By This We Know Love
The Rev. David Booman
1 John 3.11-24
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One of my sons recently asked me, *'Dad, how do I know I'm a Christian? Sometimes I'm not sure.'* Have any of you ever doubted? Have you ever wondered, *'Am I really a Christian, or am I just playing one on TV?'* It's a great question, and one the Apostle John addresses in his first letter. You see, in the late 1st century, there was a major schism in the church. Some folks believed *this*. Some folks believed *that*. And it created a ton of confusion. Especially for thoughtful people who asked honest questions. Are *they* the true church? Are *we* the true church? How do I know if I'm really a follower of Jesus? How do I know if I'm saved? This caused tremendous turmoil. And it can still do this in modern times.

In the late 1740's the great Jonathan Edwards dealt with this firsthand. He made a policy in his church that only people who demonstrated a minimum standard of Christian behavior could receive communion. You see, he took seriously what the Bible says about communion being *dangerous* for anyone not living in Christ. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11, *'Don't receive communion in an unworthy manner, that's why some of you are dying.'*

Well, as you can imagine, Edwards' congregation totally freaked out. And in 1750 they voted 207 to 23 to dismiss him as their pastor, after 25 years of ministry.

Yeah, people get tense around this issue – are we *really* a Christian? But it's vitally important to know. And so in this letter, the apostle offer three criteria by which people can know they're saved. There's a belief or doctrinal test. There's a behavioral or holiness test. And finally, there's a love test here in chapter 3. John says only people who truly love are genuine Christians. Verse 14, *'We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers.'* True love provides assurance of salvation. And John here points out three important things about this love.

1. The context of true love.
2. The nature of true love.
3. What we should we do if we *still* doubt our salvation.

First, the context of Christian love. I don't know about you, but I find it pretty easy to love people.

Honestly, I do. When my life is going well. When people are being nice. When I've had enough sleep. When my bank account is full. When the kids are behaving. It's a piece of cake.

But when I'm struggling. When I'm exhausted, stressed, and beat up by the world. When my computer crashes and my cat throws up under the bed, then it can be really hard to love. Context matters.

And this is where John begins. Not in a kumbaya kind of world, but a world of evil and hatred. After saying *'We should love one another'* he continues, *'We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Don't be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.'*

You talk about whiplash! We're just talking about love and now he brings up murder and fratricide and hatred! Why? Because *this* is the context in which we're called to love. Not only in the best of times, but in the worst of times. And to love well we can't be surprised by hostility.

Now in America, we've been fortunate, in that we've not experienced the hatred of the world the way most Christians have and do. By the grace of God we've been living in a bubble for 300 years. And yet my friends, there are storm clouds on the horizon. Clouds of the world's hatred. And we're beginning to feel the first drops of rain.

And if we're wise and pay attention, we can see what's coming. Because this kind of cultural change has happened before.

One of the most chilling quotes I've ever heard is from Heinrich Heine, the great German poet. In 1835, a hundred years before Hitler, Heine saw the erosion of Christianity in Germany. And this is what he wrote.

'It is to the great merit of Christianity that it has somewhat attenuated the brutal German lust for battle. But it could not destroy it entirely. And should ever that taming talisman break—the Cross—then will come roaring back the wild madness of the ancient warriors, with all their insane, Berserker rage, of whom our Nordic poets speak and sing. That talisman is now already crumbling, and the day is not far off when it shall break apart entirely. On that day, the old stone gods will rise from their long forgotten wreckage and rub from their eyes the dust of a thousand years' sleep. At long last leaping to life, Thor with his giant hammer will crush the gothic cathedrals. And laugh not at my forebodings, the advice of a dreamer who warns you away from our philosophers of nature...For thought goes before deed as lightning before thunder. There will be played in Germany a play compared to which the French revolution was but an innocent idyll.'

My friends, that taming talisman, the cross of Christ, is crumbling in America. And unless God brings revival, we're witnessing the end of Christendom. The signs are everywhere.

Just last week in New York, the sale of prostitution was decriminalized. National leaders are demanding that federal funds be cut from Christian colleges who don't embrace the sexual revolution. In addition to banning conversion therapy, activists are now demanding that *prayer* for folks struggling with sexual identity be criminalized. And just this week Richard Dawkins, maybe the world leader of militant atheism, was stripped of his 'Humanist of the Year' award, because *he* hasn't embraced the sexual revolution enough. My friends, if Richard Dawkins isn't progressive enough, we've truly entered a brave new world.

Last week I attended the Low Country Pregnancy Center banquet with 25 other St. Michaelites. The speaker was Dr. Levatino, a former abortion doctor. And he showed us the tools he used and shared how he would take something that looked like salad tongs, and reach into a woman's uterus and pull out a leg, then an arm, then a head. And he noted that many in our country are now calling for abortion on demand, all the way up to the moment of birth. Thirty years ago we heard about abortion being 'safe, legal, and rare.' Those days of even moderate restraint are long gone. As Dr. Levatino said, we're standing on the edge of the abyss.

Finally, a couple weeks ago one of our long-time mission partners from Burundi, Simon Guillebaud, preached a sermon. And he tells the story of a couple from Iran who fled the country because they converted to Christianity. In Iran they faced torture, rape, and imprisonment. But fortunately they made it to America. And yet, when they got here, the wife was disturbed by what she saw, and she told her husband. *'Please take me back to Iran. There's a satanic lullaby in this nation. All the Christians are asleep, and I feel myself falling asleep too.'*

So what's the point? *Don't be surprised when the world hates you.* One of the disturbing things they've found about genocide, is that the murderers are often not bad guys 'out there.' But are often former friends and neighbors. It really is Cain and Able. Because, as Paul says in 2nd Corinthians, *'To some we are the fragrance of life, but to others, we are the fragrance of death.'* And there's a visceral, hostile response.

But the good news is this very hostility, actually serves to reveal that we're Christians. It gives us assurance. Because if we're able to respond with the love of Christ, not with hate, bitterness, or even self-preservation, this is a powerful confirmation that we are indeed Christians.

I'm reminded of Eric Liddell, the Olympic runner who refused to run on the sabbath and inspired the movie 'Chariots of Fire.'

What's not so well known about Liddell is that after the Olympics he became a missionary to China. In 1941 when the Japanese invaded, his pregnant wife and two daughters fled the country, while he stayed behind to care for the sick. In 1943 he was captured and placed in a prison camp. He died there, just months before liberation.

This is how one of the survivors of that camp remembered Liddell: *'Often in an evening I would see him bent over a chessboard or a model boat, or directing some sort of square dance – absorbed, weary and interested, pouring all of himself into this effort to capture the imagination of these penned-up youths. He was overflowing with good humor, love for life, and enthusiasm.'*

You see, Liddell was probably a Christian when he ran in the Olympics. But his response in the prison camp was profound confirmation. So again, point one, true love is revealed in the context of hostility. Point two, the nature of true love. What exactly is love? A lot of people wonder. In verse 16 John defines it: *'By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?'*

What is true love? We see it in the cross of Christ. The sacrificial and unreserved giving of oneself. Not merely a feeling. Not sentiment or pity. Not compassion or empathy. But laying down our lives in tangible ways.

And I need to be clear, by 'sacrifice' the Bible doesn't mean 'I got a Lexus instead of a Porsche.' True love is *truly* costly.

Two weeks ago at our God Corner series, Pam Klein shared an amazing story. After she and George were married they had a 3-month old baby and a house without a septic system. They were dirt poor with no options. But amazingly, friends at their church rallied round, raised the needed funds, and resolved the situation. And these friends were *just as poor as they were.* But they gave out of their poverty, loving not only in word but in deed.

And when we see this kind of sacrificial love, it demonstrates that the Holy Spirit is at work. *Changing* us to be more like Jesus. Randy Shirley recently shared with me that before *his heart was changed*, he despised the homeless. Thought they were lazy, non-contributors. However, the Lord filled him with love and compassion. And I've seen Randy regularly, stopping to chat with the homeless, buy them food, etc. The love of Christ has changed his heart. And this is evidence that he belongs to Christ.

And so if we're wondering, 'Am I Christian?', we can apply the love test. Am I laying down my life for others?

So we've looked at the *context* and the *nature* of love. Finally, what do we do if our doubt isn't resolved? If we *still* wonder if we're a Christian? In verse 20 John recognizes that doubt can still persist, writing, *'Whenever our heart condemns us.'* What do we do if our heart still condemns?

Tim Keller shares an illustration from the movie *Schindler's List*. The true story of Oscar Schindler, a German businessman who spent all his money to save a thousand Jews during the holocaust. And there's a remarkable scene at the end of the movie. Schindler is saying goodbye to all the Jews he saved, when suddenly, his conscience strikes him.

And he laments, *'I didn't do enough. Why did I keep my car. Ten people right there. My watch, it would have given me another person. I could have got one more person and I didn't.'* And he completely breaks down weeping in the middle of the road.

My friends, this can be all of us. We can always do more. Today we can drink water instead of coffee and literally save a starving child.

And furthermore, there are all kinds of hidden motivations and sin in our hearts, that we'll never fully recognize. As J.I. Packer said, *'We're all [spiritually] sick and diseased...to a far greater extent than we realize.'* And so for those of us with sensitive consciences, our acts of love may not *fully* assuage the doubt. So what's the answer? What's the solution? Again, verse 20. *'Whenever our hearts condemn us God is greater than our heart and He knows everything.'*

What do we do, when our hearts condemn? We remember the greatness of God. We look up to Jesus and what *He* did. That He loved sinners and broken people like us. That He didn't crush a bruised reed. He said, *'Come to me you who are weary and heavy laden and find rest for your souls.'* Come to me in your sin, in your blindness, in the affliction of your conscience, and remember I already know everything you've done, and I still love you.

Because of course, unlike Oscar Schindler, unlike you and me, Jesus actually did love to the fullest possible extent. He gave everything he had. In the last week of his life, he rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, he ate his last meal in a borrowed room, the soldiers gambled for his only possession, and he was laid in a borrowed tomb.

And as He was dying, in the ultimate experience of the world's hostility and hatred. Being murdered by his own people. How did he respond? *'Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing.'* My friends, He prayed that for you, and he prayed that for me. Demonstrating once and for all that there's a wideness in God's mercy that is wider than the sea.

And when we look into the eyes of Jesus, when we throw ourselves into his arms, we realize that it's all grace, from beginning to end. And that He is greater, even than our hearts.

And so we can pray *'Lord I believe, help me in my unbelief. Lord I love, help me in my selfishness. Lord, give me assurance, not in what I have done, but in the great things you have done for me.'* For Jesus' sake. Amen.