

We are finishing the last part of the first half of our sermon series on 1 John, Alive in Christ. Each week we have been focusing on a spiritual discipline. Two weeks ago we discussed confession and absolution. Last week, we discussed reading Scripture. This week we will be talking about acts of kindness. John writes to us, **“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?”** This is hard to hear. How often have we overlooked those in need? How often have we turned our hearts against them?

The sermon title is “a heart for good.” We want a heart for good, but we read passages like verse 22, **“and whatever we ask we receive from [the Father], because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.”** We hear this, and we realize that this doesn’t describe us, and we get discouraged. How do we have a heart for good?

John writes to us, **“Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”** It’s not very convincing if our parents tell us to eat our veggies, but they themselves hardly touch a salad or steamed broccoli. Parents lead by example. In the same fashion, the Father did not love simply in word or talk, but by sending down His Son Jesus to die for our sins, that shows us love.

John tells us right away: **“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.”** On this Good Shepherd Sunday, we see this same sentiment expressed by our Lord Himself. **“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”** We see love through Jesus’ sacrificial life and death for me and for you.

We who know the whole story might say it hardly cost God anything to send His Son. He knew His Son would rise from the dead, what did He really put on the line by sending His Son Jesus down to this Earth?

We forget that God being divine is wholly unlike us. The Father cannot suffer. The Father cannot get tired. Contrary to popular depictions of God as a grandfather in a robe with a beard, God has no body. By becoming human, God took on all the vulnerabilities that are part of our humanity. And this act of God becoming man in the person of Jesus Christ was an irreversible act. Jesus is and remains human. God is and remains human.

We don’t fully understand and we may never fully understand what our Lord gave up in becoming a human. As we look back to Christmas, we can see that God was born. God was stuck into a dirty manger. As we look to the events of Jesus’ life, God was hungry; God was rejected. As Jesus was arrested in the Garden, God was tortured; God’s hands were pierced. God took on all the sins of the world; God died for me and for you precisely because He became human in the person of Jesus Christ. We will never fathom the depths of love that brought God to lay down His life for His brothers. Through this sacrificial love, Jesus Christ rescues us from sin,

death, and the devil, as His death and resurrection was accomplished to forgive our sins and give us a new heart. 3. The Father shows us love in Jesus.

But how do we have a heart for good? The atoning sacrifice of Jesus is the basis for our salvation, but our sins work to make us second guess this. John further explains in verse 24, “**And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.**” The Holy Spirit takes the love that was won for us by Jesus and works to reshape our hearts into God’s image.

“**By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.**” This is how we have a heart for good, God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

The atonement that Jesus won for us on calvary covers all our sins: past, present, and future. If we ever feel guilty for sins that we have committed, it’s not because Jesus’ blood was insufficient, it is because we’re forgetful of how deep the Father’s love for us is.

How prideful does someone have to be to think that Jesus’ sinless blood is not enough to cover his offenses? When your conscience condemns you, know that God is greater than your conscience. Your sins are forgiven. You are a beloved child of God. You are perfect in God’s sight on account of Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for you.

We talked about confession and absolution as well as Scripture reading these past couple weeks, and these are two tools in the Holy Spirit’s toolbelt that He uses to reform and apply the forgiveness and love of Jesus into your heart. We cannot serve others unless we have first been served these healing gifts which restore our hearts so deformed and tainted by sin. The Holy Spirit uses the Lord’s Supper, the Word of God, and Confession and Absolution to cleanse our hearts frequently and regularly which are so prone to doubt God’s promises. 2. The Father cleanses our heart through the Spirit.

And this is the key to how we live our lives as Christians. “**And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.**” The commandments that we are called to keep are to believe in the name of his Son Jesus and to love one another. We discussed how this is possible, we believe in the gift that Jesus His Son gave us, namely, that Jesus Christ, true God, suffered, died, and rose for you.

If Jesus were not true God, then there would be nothing special about his death. If Jesus were not true man, He would not truly have suffered because God cannot suffer. By believing in Jesus we then seek out the places He promises to be, and the Holy Spirit works to cleanse our hearts to love others. This is how we have a heart for good.

All that by way of preface to re-examine where John writes, **“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? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”** How do we turn words into deeds?

First, I want to underline the fact that we cannot help others unless our hearts are connected to the source. Those who want to engage their community with good deeds cannot do so unless they are connected to the local church. Our time in worship and our time in God’s Word is a lifeline to serving others because through it the Holy Spirit delivers us the peace of Jesus through a cleansed heart.

Second, service focuses on Christians and spirals outward. It can be hard to know where to start when it comes to service because there are so many needs. Every week our church gets calls from strangers asking for some sort of assistance such as hotel vouchers or gas cards. Sadly, I turn them away because although our Good Samaritan fund can support perhaps a dozen in such need, we are not equipped to serve all who have such needs, and we lack the resources to discern real needs from enabling irresponsible behavior.

What we are able to do is use the Good Samaritan fund and similar to support fellow Christian brothers and sisters in their physical needs. If you have a need, we can help, and if you don’t ask, I can’t say yes. If our members are lacking daily basics, it is a poor witness to the love of Christ abiding in our congregation.

Third, there are plenty of opportunities to serve. There is no shortage of ways to serve in our church, and there is no shortage of charities that we can partner with to help care for the needs of our neighbors. The week of April 28th, one week from now, we will be partnering with the fraternity next door to collect food at our church to donate to the Hunger Task Force on May 3rd, and we have a sign up sheet in the narthex to volunteer at the Kane Street Garden on May 4th which is a community garden which helps feed our neighbors.

Fourth, if your heart is beating, you can serve. I talked to an older lady after a church service at Havenwood, a senior living apartment in Onalaska. She said, “Why am I here? Why can’t I go to be with Jesus?” I said, you can pray, right? God wants you praying for those in our life and those prayers are pleasing to Jesus. If you have a telephone, you can call others to give them a word of encouragement. If you can write, you can send notes of encouragement to others. These may not be as glamorous as feeding the homeless or writing a big check, but these are valuable ways to serve others. 1. The Father opens our heart to serve.

THE FATHER GIVES US A HEART FOR GOOD THROUGH THE WORK OF HIS SON DELIVERED BY THE SPIRIT. Being forgiven and cleansed by God, we can put our faith into action in these ways.