

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

April 1, 2012

Crucified with Criminals

No. 3613

Rev. Rodney Kleyn

Dear radio friends,

In this message we will meditate on the suffering and death of Jesus Christ from the point of view of Luke 23:33. I want us to focus especially on the last words of this verse: “they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.”

We know that this detail of Jesus’ death, that He was crucified between two criminals, is significant because it is recorded in all four of the gospels. In Matthew 27:38 we read: “Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left.” John 19:18 says, “they crucified him, and two other with him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst.” To this Mark adds that this happened in fulfillment of prophecy (Mark 15:27, 28), “And with him they crucify two thieves; the one on his right hand, and the other on his left. And the scripture was fulfilled, which saith, And he was numbered with the transgressors.” The prophecy that is fulfilled is Isaiah 53:12.

It was no accident that Jesus was crucified between two malefactors. This happened by God’s appointment and according to God’s eternal purpose. Who was responsible for this we do not know. It may have been a statement from Pilate against the Jews: “Here is your king, debased and identified with the lowest in your society.” Or it may have been that the Jews wanted this so that Jesus and His disciples would be shamed. In either case, God was sovereign. Though wicked men did it, God determined it, and the fact that Scripture makes much of it means that it is worthy of our study.

Jesus’ crucifixion between these two criminals is a sign. It tells us something. God is telling us something by it. In this Jesus is identified with sinners, and at the same time He creates a division between sinners—the one saved and the other eternally condemned.

Who were these malefactors? They were men convicted of capital crime, men who had been involved in theft and murder, who had been previously tried and placed on death row. These were men who were worthy of death, as one of them acknowledges later in verse 41. Why does God put these two on either side of Jesus? What do they represent? They represent to us the entire human race. Here we are told about humanity as a whole—what every man is and what every man deserves. Notice, as they are described, there is no distinction made between them. They are simply described as two malefactors. They are lumped together. We do not know which one was on Jesus’ right or which one was on His left. Both have been judged as murderers, and both are condemned to death. There is no question concerning their guilt. Who are they? They are sinners, both of them, worthy of death.

And that is humanity. This is the world of man. That is you and that is I. All of us are represented in these two criminals. In Romans 3 God’s Word says that we are all under sin,

there is none righteous, no not one; there is none that doeth good, no not one; there is no fear of God before their eyes. And because of this, all are worthy of death, that is, eternal death in hell. This is so because we all have a common head, a common origin in Adam. His sinfulness and his guilt are transmitted to all men. Romans 5:12, "By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." And verse 18: "By the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation." We are all lumped together in these two malefactors. We all bring forth the same fruits of unrighteousness. We are all sinners. We all deserve the same condemnation.

Dear listener, do you see yourself in these two malefactors. Alongside Jesus, we are the guilty sinners.

It is significant that these two were crucified. The Scripture tells us that this death, by crucifixion, symbolized the curse of God against man. In the Old Testament, the Israelites were forbidden to leave hanging overnight those who were crucified because "he that is hanged is accursed of God." In their death, not only is the Roman judiciary condemning and saying they are not worthy to live and walk among men, but God Himself is saying this about them. This is the accursed death. The one who is suspended on a cross is not worthy of the earth and is not worthy of heaven with God. He hangs in a no-man's land where every man belongs. In the crucifixion of the malefactors, God says to *all* humanity: "You are cursed."

Jesus is numbered with these two transgressors. He is crucified between them. The three are lumped together under the curse. Yet there is a difference between them. Not only a difference between Jesus and these two, but a difference between the two. Jesus, being in their midst, divides them. The death of Jesus Christ makes a distinction between the two of them. Later in the chapter we learn that one believes and is saved, and the other is hardened and condemned eternally.

I said that they symbolize humanity. In the human race, throughout all of history, there is this same separation caused by the cross and suffering of Jesus Christ. The gospel comes throughout history, and it divides. It leaves in its wake two peoples. Its message that all are sinners brings two responses. It creates believers and unbelievers.

This distinction is not because one people are better in themselves than the other. It is not the case that one of these malefactors is not as bad as the other one. Both are justly condemned. Matthew tells us that initially both of them joined in with the multitudes in mocking Jesus. We are all in the same condemnation.

The explanation for these two peoples, for the difference between these two malefactors, is the sovereign predestinating grace of God. In eternity, in the mind and purpose of God, there are already these two peoples. God has known and loved His own people from before the foundation of the world. He has determined their number and who will be included in that number. He has chosen His people and rejected the rest. In His love, He sends His Son to die for those whom He has chosen. And in His death, Christ creates this same division. He does not give a loving sacrifice of salvation for both of these criminals, nor for all of humanity, but He dies to secure the salvation of His own by making payment for their sins.

From the beginning of history to its end, the message of the gospel makes this division. In the very beginning (Gen. 3:15), God speaks of two seeds—the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. He speaks of their enmity. In Genesis 4 that division becomes clear in the children of Adam and Eve. Cain is the wicked son and Abel, the believing son. And that division is created by the sacrifice of a lamb. One rejects it, the other believes it. Jesus, in the midst, creates a divide in the human race.

How does He do this? Let us look at the scene at Golgotha. In the first moments of the crucifixion, Jesus does nothing. The result is that both express the same hatred for God and His Son. Both curse Him. Both rail on Him. Before the work of grace comes, the elect malefactor is exposed for what he is by nature. But then Jesus turns His attention to this sinner and begins a wonder work of grace in Him. He works quickly, for He has only a few hours before this man will die. There is no time for extended instruction and gentle leading. He must work quickly and powerfully.

What we see and hear of this work is what goes on externally. But there is another work, an invisible and powerful work, going on in the heart of this one chosen, elect criminal. God, by a sovereign work, plants in the heart of this one, this child eternally loved, a principle of new life, a seed of regeneration. God works on him by the power of the Holy Spirit so that he is born again, born from above. And born again, he can now see and desire the kingdom of heaven. Apart from that work, he is spiritually blind and dead.

Accompanying that work of the Holy Spirit is what we see and hear externally at the scene of Calvary. Jesus brings the gospel to this poor sinner—a gospel that will bring this railing, cursing man to see that he deserves eternal death, and a gospel that will bring him a word of mercy and grace in his repentance. He hears that gospel in the prayer of Jesus from the cross: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” That prayer comes to him powerfully and personally. He realizes that the One next to him who calls God His Father is the Son of God. He realizes that the One next to him, who prays: “Forgive them,” has the power to forgive sins. He realizes that the power of forgiveness is in the death of the One with whom he is crucified. God confirms that word in his heart by the Spirit. And the distinction is clear immediately.

The other criminal hears and witnesses all the same things. There is no difference there. And yet, he is hardened. His own words condemn him. That shows us the innate hardness of heart in man. Wherever Jesus appears with the Word of the gospel and the message of the cross, the thoughts of men’s hearts are revealed. The cross is an offense and a stumbling block to many. The cross declares sin and the justice of God. It tells us that we all deserve condemnation from God. It tells us that Christ is the only way. It calls us to forsake all trust in ourselves for acceptance with God, to be empty of self, to be repentant of sin, and to trust in Jesus alone—the only way of salvation. And to the unregenerate heart, that is an offense, a stumbling block. It hardens the natural man in his sin.

Here the malefactor continues to curse and rail on Jesus. He heard what Jesus prayed. But he says, “If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us.” He will not be humbled. He will not recognize what he deserves. He will not trust in Christ for salvation. That takes a work of God’s grace. This is the natural man’s response to the gospel.

But God works grace in the heart of the other. In him there is a softening and a repentance. He turns to his fellow murderer and, speaking past Jesus, he says to him: “Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly...but this man hath done nothing amiss.” He is saying, “You’re about to die for your sin. Don’t you fear God, the Judge?” What an evidence of faith that confession is.

Faith is both knowledge and confidence. This man knows what is essential for true faith. He knows himself. Concerning his own crucifixion, he says, “we indeed justly.” He confesses his sin. He knows what he deserves. He does not evade the guilt of his sin. When all eyes are on him, he makes a public confession. And he trusts not in himself but Christ. “Lord,” he says, “remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.” Not “remember me for what I’ve done,” but “God, be merciful to me the sinner.”

And he knows his Savior. He says of Jesus, “This man hath done nothing amiss.” Here is the spotless Lamb of God, crucified, condemned by all who stand around the cross, but not by this man. By these words concerning Jesus he sets to naught the judgment of the whole world against Christ. He contradicts the verdict of Pilate and Herod and the Sanhedrin and the high priest and all the people who cried, “Crucify Him, crucify Him!” This man, he says, “has done nothing amiss.” The spotless Lamb of God. And what confidence there is in his faith. What a confession concerning Jesus.

What a trust in Him for salvation. “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.” In those words we have an amazing expression of trust in Jesus. When everyone else has forsaken Him, this man trusts in Him. He is the first one to see and understand the cross and the suffering of Christ for what it is—the first New Testament believer. When the disciples despair; when the Jews are looking for an earthly king; this man understands the work and the kingdom of Christ. He sees that shortly Christ will be enthroned in His heavenly kingdom. And he sees that the suffering of the cross is the way for the sinless Savior to bring His people with Him into that kingdom. “Lord,” he says, “remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”

What a marvelous work God does in the salvation of this sinner in his dying moments. The work of salvation that God accomplishes in the hearts of His elect today by the gospel is no less remarkable. By the same Spirit He brings the same gospel to open our blind eyes and to give us a living, confident faith in Jesus. Praise God for His sovereign grace.

As we finish this message, let us move our vision from the two thieves to the center, to Christ, who is numbered with the transgressors.

Who numbered Him with the transgressors? Who counted Him a criminal with the others? The world did. Men did. They viewed Him as just one more of the many thousands who deserved to die. They rejected Him. But in doing this, they bring condemnation on themselves. The whole proceeding of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion shows His innocence. They need false witnesses. Pilate declares four times: “I find no fault in him.” Judas, admitting that he had betrayed innocent blood, went and hanged himself. Christ is innocent. Man who has condemned Him is guilty.

Yet, though He is innocent, God His Father numbers Him with the transgressors. Who counts Him a criminal? Who numbers Him with the transgressors? God does. The crucifixion is an expression of God's curse resting on His Son. He is crucified with sinners because He is crucified *for* sinners. The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. God takes the curse off His people. God takes the curse off the one malefactor and off all of His sheep and He lays that curse on this spotless Lamb. He who knew no sin is become sin for us. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us.

And the beauty of the cross is that the Savior does this willingly. He numbers Himself with the transgressors. Not only does the world crucify Him. Not only does God condemn Him for us. But He says, "I lay down my life of myself." And in so doing, He actively and lovingly takes on Him the guilt of the sin of His own sheep.

And that is the basis of our trust in Christ. He first loved us! The malefactor heard. He repented. He believed. And that night he went to Paradise—all because Jesus was crucified with criminals.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for the Son of Thy love, for His willingness to take our sin on Himself, and for the gospel of the cross that is still proclaimed today to bring us sinners from darkness and unbelief into the light and to faith. We are sinners. We are worthy of death. But believing, we confess. Because He died the accursed death, we have confidence and hope. We thank Thee, Lord. Thanks for Thy unspeakable gift. Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

April 8, 2012

Not Faithless but Believing

No. 3614

Rev. Rodney Kleyn

Dear Radio Friends,

Every Sunday is a day of remembering the resurrection of our Savior from the dead. Early on the first day of the week He arose from the grave. And, ever since, the Christian church has kept this day as her Sabbath, the Lord's Day, in remembrance and celebration of His victorious resurrection.

Today, on what has become known as Resurrection Sunday or Easter Sunday, we give special attention to the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus' resurrection was a literal, bodily resurrection, a real, historical event. Not only do we remember it as a historical event, but our interest as Christians is especially in its *purpose* for us. Why and for what did Jesus rise from the dead? And what does that matter? What does it mean for the Christian today in the twenty-first century?

Today we are going to look at the resurrection of Christ from the point of view of John 20:24-29, where Jesus appears to His disciples in the upper room. This is the second time that He has come to them here. And this time Thomas, who was not there the previous Sunday, is present with them.

After the first visit the other disciples tell Thomas, "We have seen the Lord." But Thomas says, "except I shall see his hands and the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe." Now, it is very typical of Bible commentators to analyze and be extremely critical of Thomas for this statement. Often he is called "Doubting Thomas." He is judged as a skeptic, a pessimist, and a stubborn character. His absence at the time of Jesus' first appearance is said to be an indication that he is wavering in faith and forsaking the other disciples.

But the Bible says nothing like that. Such speculation is not helpful at all in our learning from this appearance of the risen Savior. What can we, twenty centuries later, say about Thomas that would be fair? These things are written for us. And we need to examine ourselves, not Thomas.

From a positive point of view, there are certain things that we can say about Thomas. The Bible tells us that Thomas was a true and faithful disciple of Jesus, a man whose faith was genuine, who was loyal to the Lord, and who loved the Lord. That was the Spirit's work in Thomas. In John 11:16, after Jesus tells the disciples that He is going to the house of His friend Lazarus in Bethany (who had died), Thomas says to the other disciples, who are reluctant to go

with Jesus, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” That is an amazing confession of loyalty to Christ. Here is a faithful disciple, willing to die with and for the Lord. How many of us would be willing to do that—to follow the Lord in mission work, for example, to a place where our life would be threatened by persecution—when we are often reluctant to say anything, even in a society where we have freedom and do not have to fear the loss of life for our faith?

You see Thomas’ love for the Lord also in John 14:5. Jesus had told His disciples there that He is going away. And Thomas says, “Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?” That is said out of his love for the Lord. He loved the company of Jesus. He loved to hear His teaching. And he wants to be with Christ.

Yes, there is doubt in Thomas’ statement to the other disciples, but they and we are no different than Thomas. All of the disciples, with Thomas, equally doubted the resurrection of Jesus. In Luke 24:11 the Bible tells us that when the women came from the tomb saying that they had seen the risen Lord, the words of the women seemed to the disciples as idle tales and they believed them not. They dismissed the reports of the women as ridiculous fairy-tales. Mark tells us that when multiple witnesses of the risen Lord came to them they did not believe. When Jesus appears to them, He rebukes them for the hardness of their heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He was risen. When He comes to them at the time of His ascension, Matthew tells us that some of them worshiped Him, but others doubted. That is in Matthew 28:17. So this doubt was not unique to Thomas, so that he should be labeled “Doubting Thomas.”

But then, even as we talk about the doubt of all the disciples, let us also not condemn them as if we would be any different. Just think of what these disciples had gone through. All their hopes and all their emotional attachment dashed in a day. In Luke 24:21 the travelers to Emmaus say, “We trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel,” and now things have taken a drastic turn in His death and in these stories of His resurrection. What turmoil, what trial their faith had to go through.

I do not mention all this to justify their doubt and the weakness of their faith. No, Jesus rebukes them and Thomas for their weak faith. But I say all this because 1) we must not put ourselves above them, but rather should stand alongside of them. Our faith, which comes without seeing, is as much a gift of God’s grace as was theirs. And, 2) the weakness of their faith, and Jesus’ dealing with them, is recorded in Scripture for us so that we might, without seeing, believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and that believing we might have life through His name. I just quoted the last verse of John 20, which follows the story of Thomas, which tells us why this was written. Our faith is far from perfect. And this appearance of Jesus to Thomas and the other disciples is written so that we may be strengthened in our faith.

Now let us see how Jesus encourages and strengthens these disciples, and particularly Thomas, who are weak in their faith.

There are two things we should notice. First, what Jesus says to Thomas. And then second, the manner in which He says it.

In what He says, Jesus is direct and forthright. He says in verse 27: “Be not faithless, but believing.” He is saying to Thomas, “Don’t be unbelieving, but have faith.” He is telling Thomas, “This is your problem: you don’t believe, you don’t have faith when you should.” Now, that does not mean that Thomas was an unbeliever, but rather that, as a believer, he was not trusting and believing the promises and the Word of God as he should. He was refusing to accept them as true and reliable. And for the believer, that is sin, very serious sin. All our other sins get at the things of God that He has given to us and created. This sin, the sin of doubt, gets at the character of God. When we do not believe the Word and the promises of God, we are questioning His truth and His dependability.

And that is what Thomas is doing here. He did not believe what the other disciples told him. But, worse, he did not believe what Jesus had told him. Before His death, Jesus had told the disciples very plainly and repeatedly that He would rise again from the dead on the third day. He had demonstrated His power over death in raising several people from the dead. He had told His disciples, in connection with the resurrection of Lazarus, “I am the resurrection and the life.” But they did not believe. And now, Jesus is reminding Thomas of what He had said and done and He is telling him, “You should have believed. I told you these things before. And I proved it. Be not faithless, but believing.”

We need to hear the same words of the risen Savior. Jesus is to be believed. He is to be taken at His word. Everything that He says, everything that God says in the Scriptures, is trustworthy and true. And, too often, we are faithless when we ought to be believing. Just think of the promises, all the promises of God in Scripture. And then think of your life and the times of doubt and the times that you wrestle with sin. God has promised that all our sins are forgiven through Jesus’ blood. Yet, all the weight of the guilt of sin makes us wonder sometimes about the power of the cross and the strength of God’s love. The power of sin has been overcome. It has been defeated. God has promised us His Holy Spirit. And yet, too often, in unbelief, we just give in to sin. You believe that all things work together for good to them that love God. You believe that the God who loves you and gave His Son for you is the sovereign over all things. And yet, you are troubled and anxious and faithless when trials come into your life. You believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Yet, at the grave of a loved one, fear wells up in our souls. You believe the promise of Jesus that He is going to come again and that we will be taken to heaven and glory, yet we forget that so often and we do not live in the light of that coming. And then you, then we, need to hear Jesus rebuke: “Be not faithless, but believing.” Believe the word and the promises of the risen Lord.

Now, I want you to notice also how Jesus says this to Thomas. I love this because this is how Jesus deals with me in my weakness and unbelief. He is not only straightforward, but He is also tender. Verse 26 tells us that He greets the disciples with the words, “Peace be unto you.” That implies that He knew their turmoil. He understood what they had been going through in the struggle of their faith. Think of Thomas in the intervening week, between hearing when Jesus was risen and this appearance. He had heard all the stories of Jesus’ resurrection and appearances, but he says, “I will not believe except I touch Him and see Him.” How unhappy that must have made him. The times that we doubt the promises of God are our most troublesome and unhappy times. Unbelievers are the most troubled of people in the world.

And now Jesus' first word to Thomas is: "Peace," He speaks peace! "Peace be unto you." Those are the words of blessing and benediction of God to His people. "Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you." There is a kindness and a love, a tenderness and an empathy, in those words. Jesus does not come and censure and condemn Thomas. He comes to those who are slow and dull in their faith with a shepherd's heart. Verse 27 tells us what He is willing to do to help Thomas. He says, "Thomas, reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing." In those words Jesus is not ridiculing Thomas or making an example of him. He is showing His mercy and His condescension. He accommodates Himself to the weakness of Thomas' faith in order to lift him up.

Now, think about it. Usually we shrink away from wounds and scars caused by injury. And we are shy or embarrassed about physical deformities. Jesus is saying here to Thomas, "Thomas, if that is what you need to do, if you need to put your finger through my hands, if you need to thrust your hand into my side, I'm willing. Do it, Thomas." This is how Jesus treats all the disciples after His resurrection. He suits His appearances to them in their unique situations in order to draw them out and to strengthen their faith. Here He shows Thomas not only that it is really Himself. But the signs and the evidences are here of His suffering and then of His resurrection, of His sacrifice and His power.

And He condescends in exactly the same way to us, to His church today in the world, in the weakness of our faith. I think of the sacraments that He has given to remember His suffering. Why did He give them? Is it because His promises and His word are not enough? No, the word is sufficient. The value of the sacraments, though, is this, that He adds visible and external signs to His word, to help us in our faith. We are just like Thomas. We want to see and to touch. So He gives us the sign of washing of sin in baptism, and the signs of broken bread and bitter wine at the Lord's Supper to remind us of His suffering. He condescends to us in this physical world.

And in that mercy towards us we have a pattern and an example for how we should deal with and treat others—our children, for example. Every person that God creates in this world is different and unique. Every child that we have is different. We must appreciate that. We must appreciate that in our families and in the church, and approach each individual with understanding and with kindness and with mercy, in order to reach them and to help them. That is effective communication. And we see how effective it is with Thomas. Now Thomas does not need to touch. The mercy and the compassion and the approach of Jesus to him is enough. We can be thankful for merciful people like this in our lives. A tenderhearted mother or wife in the home, a gentle father or gentle elder in the church. These people who know Christ's mercy to them are a great blessing to us. People who can be honest with us but who, at the same time, we can trust because we have experienced their love.

The words and approach of Jesus to Thomas bring from him a beautiful confession in verse 28. Thomas answers: "My Lord and my God." This is, first, a double confession of the deity of the Savior. He is saying, "You are God." Lord and God are titles that do not belong to a man but to God alone. And Thomas gives both of these titles to Jesus. The purpose of the resurrection is that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Thomas, seeing the risen Lord, believes and confesses this. That is a complete confession. That is the foundation to

any Christian confession. He was not just a man, but He was God in the flesh. His resurrection proves that He is God. He did not come simply to deliver from earthly troubles, but He came as the Savior from sin. And because He is God, He could make that payment for our sins.

For Thomas, this is a personal confession: “*My Lord, and my God.*” That shows that Thomas rests now in Christ and trusts now His word and promises. Now he does not need to touch and to see. But Lord, my Lord and my God, You have spoken: I believe.

This confession shows also the resolve of Thomas. Not only does he say, “my God,” but also “my Lord.” We do not know much about Thomas’ life after this, but one who says, “my Lord,” to Jesus expresses a willing submission to Him, a readiness to live in service to Him. My Lord, and my God.

That should be the confession of every believer. Do you make that confession today? Or, like the old Thomas, do you want more, do you want to see and to touch something? You want a sign of some sort? In verse 29 Jesus makes a comparison. He says, “Thomas, because you have seen me you have believed. Blessed are those that have not seen and yet have believed.” In those words Jesus is looking ahead to the rest of the New Testament and to all the believers that will follow. He is saying not only that the faith of those who have never seen Him is superior to the faith of Thomas who did see Him; but also that true faith does not need to see and to touch Him. True faith does not need visible signs, extraordinary signs, for confirmation.

Let me ask you: what would you prefer, an hour with Jesus, or an hour with your Bible? What would make your faith stronger: a miracle, someone raised from the dead, or spending time in the Word of God and reading what has been recorded there for us New Testament believers? Today, too many are looking for extraordinary revelations, for visions, for experiences, for miracles, for extra blessings that result in prophecy and speaking in tongues and so on. They suppose that these things are really going to help them to believe, to make them stronger in their faith. In fact, some say that you really are not a Christian until you have their extra blessings and experiences in your life.

But Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” You see, the object of our faith is not something visible and tangible. The object of our faith is the Word of God and the revelation in it—not only of true historical events, but of the Savior and His work for us. Jesus is the object of our faith.

May God give us that kind of faith, the faith that believes and hopes in Christ and the promises of His Word.

Let us pray.

Lord, we give thanks for the risen Savior and for His finished work. We thank Thee for His death and suffering for sin, for His victorious resurrection. And we thank Thee for His mercy to us sinners, for the way that He comes to us by the Word and Spirit to awaken us and turn us from darkness and unbelief to faith in Him. Give us a strong and true faith that hopes in His promises and that believes His Word in the Scriptures. For Jesus’ sake we pray, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

April 15, 2012

If We Confess...

No. 3615

Rev. Rodney Kleyn

Dear Radio Friends,

Have you confessed your sin? Do you confess your sin? Do you know whether you are forgiven all your sins?

The most difficult thing for any person to do is to confess his sin—to say, “I am a sinner”; to say to God, “I am a sinner and I need forgiveness and grace.” It is difficult enough for us to admit to one another that we are wrong and to ask for forgiveness. That is not easy, is it? How much more difficult to stand before God and confess your sin?

It takes a work of God’s grace and spirit in the heart and life of a person to bring him to the point where he, before God, truly confesses his sins. And if we truly confess our sins, we know that God has worked that in us by His grace. And we can be assured of forgiveness.

Today we are going to talk about confession of sins from I John 1. I want to read verses 8-10. These verses deal with both confession and denial of sin. Listen to God’s Word.

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”

In this letter, John gives several marks or tests of genuine Christianity. And this is one of them: confession of sin. A person who denies that he is a sinner, in need of forgiveness, is not a genuine Christian. The person who confesses his sin is a genuine Christian.

In verses 8 and 10, John talks about the denial of sin. He says, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” And, “If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”

Now, the question is: who says this? Who says, “We have no sin,” and “we have not sinned”? Well, in the early church to which John writes, there was a group of false teachers called the Gnostics, and this is what they were saying: “We have no sin; we have not sinned.” They taught a kind of sinless perfection. They did not like people to be talking about sin. They said that when the gospel comes, we have to get beyond talking about sin because sin is forgiven. Then, if you would ask, “Well, what about remaining sin, that is, the sin that we still have to deal with,” then they would say, “Oh, it’s good for you to experience sin. The more sin you experience and the deeper you fall into sin, then the greater your spiritual experiences will

be; the better you will know the love and the grace and salvation of God. So,” they say, “we don’t need to talk about sin. It’s been forgiven and what remains of it is beneficial for us.”

It is surprising how similar that teaching is to what we face in our day, not only in the world of psychology but also in many evangelical churches. Nowadays, the word sin is taboo. One who uses it is thought to be judgmental. Every sin is viewed as a disease or an illness. Criminals do not need punishment, but rehabilitation. A person does not do bad things because he is a sinner, but because of circumstances or influences. What he needs is the opportunity to unlearn his bad behaviors. Any mention of sin is viewed as destructive. Everything must be tolerated—except intolerance.

Now, why is it that our society does not want to talk about sin? It is a part of the denial of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They say, “Don’t talk about sin, because we don’t need a Savior. What the Bible says about sin, about Jesus, and about His suffering for sinners, and about the justice of God, and about heaven and hell, those things aren’t true. We don’t want to hear them. Don’t talk about sin.” That is a denial of the gospel. “We don’t need the Savior. We are OK. Just leave us alone.”

In these three verses, John mentions three specific ways that one might deny the reality of sin. In verse 8, the word for sin is in the singular: “We have no sin.” The idea is that someone says that there is no such thing as sin. We, the human race, do not have sin. This is a denial of the sinful nature of man. It is a doctrinal denial of human depravity, a philosophy that says man is basically good and not evil.

Then, in verse 9, John uses the word sin in the plural: “our sins.” Now he is talking about sin from a personal point of view—actual sins that I have committed. Another way to deny sin is to deny that I have actually done something wrong.

Then, in verse 10, the denial of sin is put this way: “We have not sinned.” This person is not saying that we are not sinners. But he is saying that we don’t sin anymore. This person comes to the end of a day and he looks at what he has and has not done, and he says, “I have not sinned.” So this person does not pray for the forgiveness of sins. He believes that in his salvation and sanctification he has come to the point where he does not sin anymore.

Those are the ways to deny sin. Some say man is not sinful; others say, yes, man is sinful, but not I. There is no personal confession of sin. Then others will say, yes, I have sinned, but not lately—I’ve progressed to the point where I no longer sin.

When you deny sin, what are you doing? John says in verse 8, “We deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” In other words, we believe a lie that we have made up ourselves. We refuse to see who we truly are before God. And when we do that, there is no room for the truth of God’s Word. We harden ourselves against hearing that we are sinners. How self-destructive that is. The person who deceives himself goes on in his sin, unaware that there is anything wrong.

In verse 10 we not only lie to ourselves, but we also lie against God. We charge God with being a liar. How? In two ways. First, we say that God is bearing false witness against us when He says in His Word that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and when He says that there is none righteous, no, not one. We say God is lying when He says those things. We say God's Word is not true. But also, we make God a liar in what He says in the gospel and in sending His Son to die for sin. Why did Jesus come? Why did He die? The answer: for sin. If we have no sin, then God's work of salvation was pointless and unnecessary. But, you see, Jesus had to come and die so that, rather than God punishing us for sin, He punished His Son. So you see that a denial of sin is a denial of the gospel. If you deny sin, then you do not believe in Jesus.

In contrast to that, true believers do not deny sin but confess it—verse 9, “If we confess our sins.” To confess is to agree with and say the same thing as another. Confession of sin implies that, in the Scriptures, God has spoken to us and about us. He has said in the gospel: “Man is a sinner. You have personal sins. You continue to sin. And you need the blood of My Son, Jesus Christ, for forgiveness. Confession is to agree with what God has said, to bow before His Word, to have the same view of ourselves and sin as God has. That is confession.

Now, let me point to some characteristics of true confession of sin.

This confession of sin is doctrinal, that is, we agree with the teaching of the Word of God that all are sinners, that man is inherently sinful and not inherently good. Verse 9 speaks of sin as corporate: our sins. Sin is a reality that describes the entire human race.

This confession of sin, to be true, is personal. When I say “our sins,” I am saying “my sins.” I am guilty of specific sins. Sin is not an abstraction, an idea, but a living reality. The person who confesses his sin stops comparing himself to others and he stands before God.

That means that a true confession of sin is humble. The more God makes you holy, the more unholy you will judge yourself to be. The more you know God and Christ, the more you will see sin. One who has never seen Christ never sees his sin. The one who is forgiven does not stop weeping over his sin. No, his mourning becomes deeper. In proportion to his knowledge of the love of Christ, his hatred for sin will grow.

So this confession is continual. We can never say with verse 10: “We have no sin,” or “I have no sin anymore.” No, every day we awake to this: “Today is another day of battling with sin.” And at the end of the day we lie down knowing and confessing: “Today again I have sinned. Lord, forgive me.” This should never be missing from our prayers.

This confession of sin is total. John talks about “sins” in the plural. That means all sins. The person who is truly repentant hates not just some or most of his sins, but all of them. True repentance is a turning of the heart as well as the life. It is repentance over inward as well as outward sin.

That confession is sincere. It is not just words, but it involves a change of life. A person who truly confesses his sin turns away from it. If a person confesses his sin and then willfully goes right back to it, his confession is not sincere.

True confession is also God-centered. Only when I stand before God will I really see my sin. David says in Psalm 51: “Against thee, thee only have I sinned.” We sin not just against people and before people, but before Almighty God.

And, finally, true confession is characterized by this, that it is Christ-centered, that is, it should bring me to Jesus Christ. That really distinguishes the confession of a believer from an unbeliever. In confession we do not just say, “I’ve done something wrong,” but “Lord, have mercy on me. Forgive my iniquities. Blot out my sins.”

If we confess our sins, He, that is, God, is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. That is the promise in this verse to all who truly and sincerely confess their sin.

Now, what does John mean by the word “if”—*If* we confess? Does he mean that God waits to forgive us till we do something, till we confess? Well, it is true that God does not forgive all sin, that He only forgives confessed sin. But God does not wait on man. God’s grace is never dependent on man. No, God has already forgiven our sins before we commit them, because Jesus has paid the price already for our sin. Our confession does not merit forgiveness. Apart from grace, man could not confess his sin. So we must see that the word “if” in the Bible very often has a time-element. The idea is “when we confess our sins.”

And John is talking here not about when our sin is forgiven but about when we experience or come to know that we are forgiven. This is what he means: “When you confess, then you will know that you are forgiven.”

There are three things here in verse 9 that you will know.

First, you will know that God is faithful to forgive your sins. Faithfulness means that God is true to His Word and character, true to His promises and people. He is trustworthy. His Word is that He will forgive all who believe and confess. In Psalm 130, “There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.... Let Israel hope in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption. And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.” That is His Word. And He is faithful to it. All who sincerely come to Him in repentance *are* forgiven.

Second, you will know that God is just. He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. That means that in His forgiveness He always remains just. He does not just brush sin aside, but He punishes it with death. Having already punished the sins of His people in Jesus Christ, He has freed Himself to forgive our sins and to show His mercy without doing any injury to the justice of His own character. Your comfort, as a believer, is this: that Jesus stood in your place and carried the weight of your sins. Because of that, you are forgiven. In fact, if Jesus paid for your sins and God did not forgive you, then God would not be just in forgiving sin. But the wonderful comfort of the gospel is that when Jesus laid down His life for His sheep, He paid for all their sins, so that none of them would have to perish under God’s wrath. In believing and confessing and repenting, we show that we are God’s sheep. We believe because we are of His sheep.

One more thing. As we confess our sins, God is faithful to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Here John does not have in mind the forgiveness of sins, but the cleansing of sanctification. All unrighteousness here refers to remaining sin and evil. That, too, is an important part of our assurance as believers, especially as we struggle with sin. God says, "You confess your sin and you'll know my cleansing, sanctifying power. You see, if you are one of God's elect, if you are one for whom Jesus died, if you are one in whom the Holy Spirit has worked, if you are one who knows and confesses your sin, then you are one in whom God has begun the irreversible work of His grace. And, as you confess your sins, God's Spirit will work in you a true hatred for those sins and a true turning from them, cleansing you from all unrighteousness. That begins in our life now, and that will become perfect in heaven.

So, do you, today, confess your sinfulness, your personal sins, your present sins? May God humble us to do that and in that way give us to know forgiveness and to hate more and more our sin and flee from it.

Let us pray.

Lord, we confess our sins. We are sinful. We continue to sin. That sin is not just in what we do, but we find the principle and the power of sin working in us. And it is a constant reminder of how dependent we are on Thy grace. It humbles us, Lord. As we confess, give us the assurance of Thy forgiving grace. Like the publican who said, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner," may we go home knowing that we are justified and forgiven. And, Lord, humble us and break us where we refuse to see and confess sin. Humble us before each other and humble us before the gospel and the cross of Christ. We thank Thee for the sufficiency of His death in our place on the cross. Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

April 22, 2012

Assurance Through Obedience

No. 3616

Rev. Rodney Kleyn

Dear Radio Friends,

Today we are going to look at a passage from I John 2:3-6. John wrote this epistle to the believers in the early New Testament church in order to encourage them and give them assurance. There were false teachers who were saying, "You cannot know for certain whether you are saved until you've had certain special experiences." John counteracts that false teaching by saying that every Christian can know, simply by having a true faith in Christ and by living as he should.

John looks at this question of assurance from two points of view. First, the foundation of assurance, which is Christ: who He is and what He has done. John says, "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins." He means to say that if your assurance is shaken because you have fallen into sin, then turn to Christ. He is the answer. He is the covering for sin. He is the One who stands in God's presence in our place. Faith in Jesus Christ brings assurance.

But then John also looks at assurance from the point of view of the circumstances of our life. He gives us in this book a series of tests of true Christianity. These are not the foundation for our assurance, but the necessary circumstances in our lives. If these things are true, you can have assurance. If they are not true, your assurance will be weak.

So John mentions walking in the light, confessing our sins, loving one another, and so on. These are evidences in our lives that we are truly the children of God, proofs that the Holy Spirit has done a work in us.

Now, in the verses we are going to look at today, John puts before us the test of obedience. He talks about assurance through obedience. This is what he says in verse 3: "And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments." In these words we have a biblical statement on assurance, a biblical definition of assurance. We do know that we know Him. Notice that John uses the word "know" twice. The first has to do with what you know in yourself, in your mind. John says, "We do know," not, "we think," or "we hope," but "we do know." There is a certainty in what we know.

What do we know? We know that we know Him. Now, in the second use of the word "know," John does not have in mind simply knowing something in ourselves. But he is describing a relationship: I know Him. Here the word "know" expresses a communion of love. It describes the experience and the essence of salvation—to be loved of God and to love Him.

In John 17:3, Jesus says, “This is life eternal [He means: This is salvation, and this is heaven], to know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.” In II Timothy 1:12, Paul says: “I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.” Paul is expressing more than just a knowledge in his head, more than something he has grasped with his intellect. What he is expressing is the confidence that comes from a personal relationship of love with the Lord. That is assurance: to know God’s love and to love Him.

In verse 6 John describes assurance as knowing that we are in Him, and abiding in Him. “Abiding in Him” is a common New Testament expression of what it is to be a Christian. Jesus uses this language in John 15 when He speaks of the vine and the branches who are grafted into Him and rest in Him and belong in Him and find all their life in Him. Assurance is the ability to make this confession: I abide in Him; I am not my own, but I belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

We should see that John assumes here that it is normal for Christians to have assurance. Assurance is not just a possibility, but a reality. He says, “We do know that we know him.” He means that presently and continually we know that we have this relationship of love with the Savior. John does not say, “I hope that you know,” or “you can know,” but “we do know.”

Now, that brings up a question and a problem, really, that every believer faces at different points in his life—not so much a doctrinal question as a practical one. This is the problem. If my salvation is secure and certain in Jesus Christ, who is the propitiation for my sins, then why does my sense of that, my assurance of salvation, fluctuate? Sometimes, as a believer, you will have a great assurance and joy in your salvation. Other times, you will be troubled by doubt and you wonder whether you are truly a child of God.

There are different reasons why this can happen in our experience. Sometimes we lack assurance because of sin. Maybe the guilt of sins committed in the past weigh so heavily on us, or maybe the power of sin in our life in the present is so strong that we wonder about our salvation. Certainly when a person lives a sinful lifestyle, then he will not have the assurance of God’s love.

At other times we lack assurance because our faith in the promises of the gospel is weak. Maybe we have a wrong understanding of the gospel. Maybe we see God only as just and righteous, a God of anger and wrath, who hates sin and who will by no means clear the guilty. And we fail to see the mercy and the love and the grace of God in Jesus Christ to all sinners who come to Him in faith.

Or, it can be that as we go through severe trials in life we have a wrong understanding of the sovereignty of God in our trials. We think that because something bad is happening to us, then God must be angry with us and He is punishing us. And we fail to see that often God sends trials to us in life simply to draw us closer to Himself.

Another reason that a person may lack assurance is that he does not understand the way of salvation. He is taught that salvation is by our works, by our effort. He is told, “If you go to our

church and if you follow our set of rules, then you'll be saved." And so a person is always striving to measure up to other people, to fit into a mold. And because he does not quite measure up, he lacks assurance. But our salvation, our justification, is never dependent on works.

Another false teaching that takes away assurance is that sin in your life does not matter; that you just need to believe that Jesus is your Savior and you can go on living as you previously did. And so this person who says, "I'm saved," has no change in his life, and the guilt of sins committed just keeps piling up and following him and plaguing him and there is no assurance.

Then there is also the false teaching that tells you to pin your assurance on an experience or a decision that you made in the past at the moment and the time of your conversion. Then people, if they cannot identify such a moment, are not sure if he is saved. That is something like wondering if you are alive because you do not remember the day when you were born. But we must not look to the past to determine whether we are saved. What is important is the here and the now: Am I saved and converted and believing *today*?

Then, what complicates the problem is that there are those who seem to have assurance who should not have it. They have a false sense of assurance. You are going to run into people like that in your life. Ninety percent of people in the USA think that there is a heaven and that they are going there. These are the kinds of people that John is writing about in this book, people who say, "I know Him," but their life says something different. That is an incredibly dangerous situation to be in. This person is living a lie, deceiving himself. Jesus says that on the Judgment Day many will say, "Lord, Lord, we have done this and that in Your name." And He will say, "Depart from me. I never knew you." You see, not everyone who talks about heaven is going there. Not everyone who says he is a Christian is truly a Christian. Not everyone who claims he believes in Jesus really does believe in Jesus. There is a false assurance.

So what is the true teaching of assurance? How do we come to assurance?

John says this: "Hereby do we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments." Now, understand, this is not the complete or the only answer on how we come to assurance. But it is an important and a necessary part of the answer. The full answer is this: We come to assurance 1) by faith in God's promises that are written in the Bible for our comfort; 2) by the witness of the Holy Spirit within us that we are the children of God; and 3) by a serious Christian life of obedience and good works. Here John is talking about the third of those: "Hereby do we know that we know him, *if we keep his commandments.*"

This points to the importance of obedience in the Christian life. More important than a conversion experience, more important than a date or time that can be identified as the moment I became a Christian, is this: that I keep His commandments. What John says reminds us of the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:21: "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." And in John 14:15, He says, "If ye love me, keep my commandments." John and Jesus are simply saying this: Obedience to God's commandments will be important to everyone who loves God and to everyone who loves Jesus. This is something about which every true believer will be concerned.

Now, the word “commandments” here refers to every moral requirement in the Word of God. That includes the moral law of the Ten Commandments, and also all the admonitions and exhortations in the Bible. All of that is summarized in the one requirement of love, which Jesus gives as a summary of the Law. When Jesus says that love is what God requires, He is not replacing the commandments of the Law, but rather is raising the standard of what is required. He is saying that the obedience that God demands is not just external conformity, but it must be out of a heart of true love for God.

Being a Christian is not just following a set of rules. The kind of obedience that a Christian has is from the heart. The word “keep” describes something inward. It means to guard or protect the commandments by keeping them in your heart. Psalm 119 says, “Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee.” Paul says, “I delight in the law of God after the inward man.” I love it, I treasure it in my heart, I meditate on it. And because it is God’s Word and these are God’s commandments, then, because I love God, I obey them.

Then obedience does not mean proving to others that I live a better life than they do. I am not here to prove to others that I am a Christian. Rather, I live before God. He loves me and I love Him. God works in me by His love so that I love Him. In verse 5 John calls this the perfection of love when he says, “whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected.” God’s love in me comes to maturity when I, from a sincere heart of love for God and His Word, obey what He requires of man. And then I do not obey out of duty, but out of love before God.

Is that how you obey? Is that how you think of obedience to God and His Word, so that you delight in the will of God? Or do you resist what God’s Word tells you and find His commandments a burden? John is saying that if you truly know God, then you will, out of gratitude and delight, keep His commandments. And as you serve God that way, you will know, from your own life and heart and from a testimony of the Spirit within you, that you are a child of God. Sincere obedience is one of the ways that we come to know that we are His.

Then, you see, assurance is not an extra. It is not something that is added to our faith. But as we live a life of faith in this world, as we live and walk with God day by day, believing, following Jesus Christ, then we will have assurance. Assurance is something that arises out of a genuine life of faith.

Then, even if others laugh at the way you live, even if others think that you are different and odd because you are concerned about obeying the Word of God, that will not matter to you, because your concern is to love the Lord. The true believer obeys the commandments of God. And anything else is not genuine Christianity.

In verse 4, John says: “He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.” You can *say* that you are a Christian. You can *say* that you know Him. But the proof is in your deeds. A man may say he loves his wife, but she wants to see it. If a man has an affair and then says to his wife, “but I love you,” she is going to say, “Really? I need to see that.” His love is proved by his works. And so it is with God. If you say that you know Him, but do not keep His commandments, that is a lie.

In this obedience, we follow the pattern of Christ. In verse 6 we read, “He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.” That is, we ought to walk in obedience as Jesus did. The word “walk” refers to our conduct. We should meditate on the walk of Jesus and follow Him. Jesus was glad to submit to God’s way and purpose. Over and over He said, “I come to do the will of my heavenly Father.” And He did that, even though it cost Him. There was a price He had to pay. Think of what it cost Him. His obedience cost Him all His earthly friends. In the end, it cost Him His very life. And He even had to pay the price of suffering in hell and of losing the knowledge of His Father’s love. Christians, believers, listen. Obedience is costly. The gospel does not set us free from God’s commandments. But this is what it does: it enables us to keep them even though it may cost us.

Then also, the obedience of Jesus was perfect and complete. He was without sin. He never wavered from God’s law. We are not going to achieve that. But that is the standard for which we aim. We should not excuse or overlook sin because, well, we are sinners. No, we strive to keep all God’s commandments. We want to learn obedience because this glorifies God.

That was Jesus’ concern, too. He loved God. He was jealous for the name and the honor of God. Looking heavenward throughout His life, His motive was the glory of God through His life on earth. It was this that gave Him the ability to stand in the face of opposition and temptation.

And think, too, of how His obedience showed itself in relation to others. He was a man of compassion for the needy, a servant to others. After He had washed His disciples’ feet, He said, “I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done unto you.” Even though He was hated, He never repaid evil with evil, but rather with good.

As we meditate on the obedience of Christ, we could go on and on. It seems intimidating to compare ourselves to Jesus’ walk. Yet, we should not shrink from it. The comparison is not to cause us to despair because of our sin. But in ourselves we see the small beginning of this obedience, this faint reflection of what Christ is like. That is God’s work in us. That is His eternal purpose for us. Romans 8:29: “Whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his son.” In eternity God loved and chose His elect people in order to make them like His Son.

That is what God is doing in the life of every true believer. That is why we love God. And that is why we want to keep His commandments. God has begun a good work in us.

And we can have assurance, because He will perform that work until the day of Jesus Christ. He will perfect it when finally we are taken to glory. Then we will be transformed and be made like Christ, without sin.

Let us pray. Father, we give thanks for our salvation in Jesus Christ and all the blessings that come with that. We pray that the Holy Spirit may continue to give to us hearts of love for Thee and Thy Word so that we *do* keep Thy commandments, so that we walk as Jesus walked. And then give us to know that we know Thee and to know that we are not our own but that we abide in Christ. For His sake we pray, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

April 29, 2017

The Test of Love

No. 3604

Rev. Rodney Kleyn

Dear Radio Friends,

One of the great dangers that every church and every believer should watch out for is the danger of spiritual apathy. This can happen especially where the church is strongly established or where someone is a longtime or a lifetime believer and church member. A congregation of believers loses their first love for the gospel. People become comfortable, lethargic, indifferent to spiritual things. A person thinks he is saved because he is in a good church. but there is no real love for Christ and no real faith in Jesus. People come to church but not to Christ. They know the Word of God but not the God of the Word.

It is that kind of comfortable apathy that John addresses very directly in his first epistle. He calls it “self-deception.” People say, “I am in Christ,” and “I know Him,” but there is no evidence of it, no real life in Christ.

Over against this, John gives us what we can call the tests or evidences of genuine Christianity. How do we know that we know Him? There are vital signs, evidences of genuine faith. Just as a doctor looks into a patient’s eyes and checks a person’s pulse for life, so we can do spiritually. There are signs of life.

Today, from chapter 2:7-11, we are going to look at the vital sign of love. This is one of the most important, and should be one of the clearest and most evident, signs of true faith in the church and in the life of a Christian. In John 13:35 Jesus says, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”

What is love? We live in a period of history that talks about love more than any other, but is more ignorant of what love is than any other. If you ask today, “What is love,” the answer you will receive is this: “Love is an emotion. I love someone because I’m attracted to him. I love you because you stir something in my appetite.” Love has come to mean romantic love.

And we use the word “love” that way, too, not just in reference to romance and relationships, but quite easily for other things. Someone will say, “I love that dress,” “I love your hair,” or “I love a good juicy steak,” or “I love that car.” But that is not love. That is a wrong view of love. Why? Because if I apply that idea of love to my relationship to other people, then when the romance is gone, or when I am no longer attracted to that person, then I am going to stop loving him. Then I am going to run off and find love somewhere else.

So, we should see that love is not simply an emotion, not something determined by my tastes or preferences. As I said, that is the view of love in the world today. It is very selfish. Just look at the family unit and what has become of marriage and children and the view of children in our society. This wrong view of love explains divorce. A man will say of his wife, "I don't love her anymore." What does he mean? He means, "She doesn't please me anymore, so I'm no longer willing to be committed to her and to make the sacrifices necessary to preserve our marriage. I'm going to find love elsewhere." That is not love, that is selfishness.

You see the same in what drives abortion in our culture. It is called "choice." And it *is* a choice, a choice not to love. "This child is going to get in the way of my pleasure, so I'm not willing to keep it alive." And babies are murdered. Generations of children are growing up in this world and they do not know what love is.

Why does the world think of love in this way? Because it is natural for man, apart from the grace of God, to view love that way. But when God, by His Spirit, regenerates a person, then the love of God is shed abroad in his heart. Then a flood of God's love overwhelms that person and turns him from selfishness and hatred to true love. Think of Saul of Tarsus, who breathed out hatred and murder against the people of God. God worked in him, and he became a man of love who sacrificed his life to minister to God's people. Every believer, every true believer, possesses that heart of love. This will set the Christian apart from the world of unbelievers.

What does this true love look like? The word that is used here for "love" in I John, is the Greek word *agape*. Maybe you have heard that word before. This word has to do with the will and not the emotions. It tells us that love is a choice that we make; love is not just a desire or an emotion or a feeling. That is why the Bible, and why John here, calls love a commandment. Love is our duty. Disobedience to that commandment is a choice that we make. When a person says, "I don't feel like loving," that is a choice to disobey God's commandment of love.

So, true love is not based on emotion. It is not based on how I feel about the other person, or what I like or do not like in him. Now, some people can be very difficult for us to love. They can be like a prickly porcupine. They have a few good points, but if you put your arms around them, it is going to hurt you. Well, Christian love does not look at the worthiness of the object. Christian love is unconditional. It transcends all differences. It takes me out of my comfort zone, so that I love the unlovely.

That points us to another characteristic of love. Love is expensive. It will cost you something. A person who truly loves another will do whatever must be done, will pay whatever price must be paid for the other. It will go into a burning house; it will jump into a shark infested waters; it will completely give up itself. Real love sets aside all my personal preferences, all my comforts, all my time, all my happiness for the other. I am willing to die for the other.

This true love has a heart of service. John here is talking about love between believers. If you love the other members of the body of Christ, you will give up all your comforts, you will make yourself uncomfortable, you will serve for their sakes.

Again, how different that is from the view of love in our world. The world says, “If it’s going to cost you, don’t do it. Bringing forth that child, loving your wife, is going to mean giving up things. So don’t do it,” the world says.

Now, as John puts this test of love before us, he speaks of an old commandment and a new commandment. There seems to be a contradiction in what he says. What does he mean when he says, “Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning,” and then, “a new commandment I write unto you, which thing is true in him and in you”? Very simply, John is saying, “I’m not bringing you something new that you don’t already know, that you haven’t heard of before.” When he says, “old commandment,” he means an ancient commandment, a commandment from the beginning. That refers not to the beginning of a person’s life or the beginning of salvation, but to the beginning of the world—to the beginning of God’s revelation. John calls this commandment the “word,” or “revelation from God”—“which ye had from the beginning.”

And John is saying that love has always been the requirement of God’s law. This is the essence of every one of the commandments. If a man loves his wife, he will not commit adultery. If a man loves his neighbor, he will not steal from him. If a child loves his parents, he will honor them. If a person loves God, he will worship Him alone and worship Him as He has commanded in His Word. So, this is an old requirement, an old commandment.

But why, then, does John call it a “new commandment”? Well, there are two words that the Bible uses for “new.” One has the idea of something that is brand new, and the emphasis is on time and the beginning of existence of something. The other has the idea of something that is *renewed*, and the emphasis is not so much on when it began to exist, but on its *quality*. I can have a brand new car, or I can have an old car that is rebuilt from the ground up and is as good as new. That old car will have some new parts and some new paint, but it is the same “old car.” That is the idea here. This commandment of love is not brand new, but there are some new elements to it. So it is called a “new commandment.”

What is it that makes this old commandment new? First, the commandment to love had fallen on bad times and needed to be restated in its original form. In Jesus’ day, and in John’s day, the commandments of the law were viewed merely as a rule or guide for external conduct. The Pharisees said that if you followed the rules, you could attain righteousness through the law. And they left out the heart of the law, which is love—love for God and love for the neighbor. So, this commandment is new in the sense that it is restored to its original meaning.

But the commandment to love is also new in this sense, that in the coming of Jesus it is given a new face. Jesus gives us a concrete example of what love is. So John says that this commandment is true in Him, that is, in Jesus. When He comes into this world, Jesus demonstrates what true love is. Then the commandment to love is restated and becomes more clear. The requirement of love is not to be stated simply this way, that we love others as we would love ourselves; but, as Jesus says, “As I have loved you, ye ought to love one another.” There is the standard for love: Jesus’ love.

How does Jesus love? That is a beautiful question, is it not? Because it takes us to the gospel and to the cross. It causes us to look at the saving work of Jesus Christ from the point of view of who we are by nature, and from the point of view of what we deserve. It takes us back to the Garden of Eden and to the death and the curse that came over all of us because of sin. It brings us into the depths of hell and the everlasting death and torment that our sin deserves. What did Jesus do in love? His love is not just a feeling. It is certainly not an attraction to us because He sees something that He likes in us that would reward Him. No, Jesus' love is this: that He loved the unlovely, that He made an unconditional choice in eternity to love them. In His love, He paid the ultimate price for His people—He died to redeem them. In the cross of Jesus Christ you see the perfect fulfillment, the demonstration, the power of true love. As John says, "This commandment of love is true in Him."

Then, talking to believers, John adds: "This is true also in you. This love finds shape, it finds form, it comes to expression in every true believer." John could see that in the believers to whom he wrote in the early New Testament church. And he is saying, "Because this is true in you, you can know that you know Him. This is the work of God's Spirit in love in you." In chapter 4:7 he will say, "Everyone that loves is born of God and knows God." This is one of those vital signs of genuine Christianity. It is an evidence of God abiding in us by His Spirit.

So, we must ask ourselves, you must ask yourself and I must ask myself: "Is this true in me?" We have to apply the test of love to ourselves. And in these verses, John makes that application in two ways, or to two groups of people. In verse 9 and again in verse 11, he applies the test of love to hypocritical members of the church—people who said they were believers but this vital sign of love was missing. In verse 9, "He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now." And verse 11, "He that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes." Obviously, there were people in the churches to which John was writing who said, "We are in the light. We are the enlightened ones. We are believers." But, at the same time, they did not love the church and the people of God. They said of some in the church, "We just don't feel like loving them." They were unwilling to pay the price of love. And John says, "Even though they say that they are in the light, they are not, because their hearts are filled with the darkness of hatred."

What is hatred? It is to despise others, to have a lower view of them and their needs than of yourself and your needs. It is to envy others, to have evil thoughts and say evil words about them, to be unwilling to give up your comforts for their sake.

What does John say about such people who are in the church? He says, "They are in darkness even until now," which means, they have never known the light and the love of Christ. If they did, they would not hate their brother. He says that they "walk in darkness." Hatred belongs to Satan's kingdom of darkness. A person who hates and goes on hating is serving the devil. John says, "They know not whither they go. They may think they are going heavenward, but in reality, they are headed to hell and they don't know it." This is self-deceit. John says, "The darkness has blinded them." They are like a person who lives in solitude and darkness for years and loses his sight. That shows how dangerous it is for us to have hatred in our hearts toward our brother.

Then, in verse 10, John applies this test of love to the true believer. “He that loveth his brother,” he says, “abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him.” This person loves his brother. God’s love, which is in him, comes out in a fountain of selfless love towards others. This person does not have to tell others that he is a Christian, because, when you cross his path, you see it, it is evident in his life of love. He does not keep score with people, but he forgives them. He does not live for others to serve himself but to serve others. He is not jealous. He is not boastful. He is not arrogant. He is not rude. He is not self-seeking. He is not easily provoked to anger. He does not find pleasure in the sins and faults of others. But he is patient, he is kind, he is forgiving, he is gracious. That is the behavior of love, according to I Corinthians 13. This person is so overwhelmed with the love of God in Christ for him that this supernatural love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Spirit comes out of him to others.

John says two more things about this person. “He abideth in the light.” That means not only that he has been saved, but that he abides, he continues to walk in the light of the Word of God. He does not cause others to stumble, he does not lead others to sin, he does not set traps for them to see how they will react. John is saying, “When that fruit comes out in your life, the fruit of love, you know that God’s love is in you.”

No, we will never love *perfectly*. But we do love *practically*. It is not just words or feelings, but a sacrificial choice.

So, how is your love life? I mean, your life of love to other believers. We should apply this test to ourselves—you to yourself, and I to myself. Do you love your brother? Not your blood-brother, but the other members of God’s spiritual family. God makes them your brothers and sisters. Do you love them?

Now, think of the person who is the most difficult believer for you to love. Who is it that has hurt you the most lately? Who is it that is the most difficult person for you to forgive? Do you have a picture in your mind of that person? The greatest act of love from you is that you reach out to the person with patience, with sacrifice, with forgiveness. That is the outstanding mark of true Christianity.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for the great love of our Savior, who laid down His very life for His friends—for us, and by that, made us brothers and sisters in the household of faith. Lord, give us to love one another as He has loved us. We pray it, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.