**Sunday 25th April 2021**

Psalm 23

1 John 3: 16-24

We are continuing in the apostle John’s first letter, written to various churches in his pastoral care.

We covered over the last two weeks the points made on fellowship and unity, with each other but ultimately with God, through Jesus, accepting Him as the Son of God. And that when we accept that Jesus is the divine Son of God, and show that in our actions, trying to abide in God through His Son, to keep God’s law, that we have the privilege to make the claim to be a child of God.

John has talked a lot about sin. The objective of sin is to spoil the creation of God, and can come in three different types:

1. Morally – there can be an enticement to sin - to veer from living in the type of community on earth that God desires.
2. Physically – there will be the infliction of diseases and pain.
3. Intellectually – there will be the seduction into error, making excuses for things or lack of true knowledge of God’s character.

John has spoken in regard to Christ’s first coming – where He came to loose the chains of sin. Now, the chains have been loosed – not destroyed completely. If a chain is loosed then it is deprived of force, it cannot do the job that was intended when fastened. That is the analogy of Christ’s victory over evil. He lived on earth with us to show us how to live. He died and rose again to show that ultimately, despite the struggles there will be on earth, our salvation is secure as He has defeated death and, if we accept Him as the Son of God, will have eternal life. But the chains are still around us, tripping us up – but they are no longer fit to bind us.

John has also spoken about the second coming of Christ – our future inheritance of heaven with Him, if we abide in God and keep His laws.

We are caught in the bit in between the first and second coming – our time to be children of God, but still without the proof or revelation of what is to come, and doubt and misunderstanding of the first coming, where the work to eliminate evil was begun but not yet completed. Does John provide us with any help?

John speaks a lot about following God’s laws and commands. The same theme runs through the whole letter. John now proceeds with the most important command given, the most important of God’s laws, to love. In the preceding verses to those read, John introduces the topic of how to show love by using the example of the direct opposite, hate. What is the first example of hate in the bible? Cain. Cain killed his brother Abel. He did not kill him because he had done anything wrong, but because of Cain’s jealousy towards him. Was Cain jealous of what Abel owned? No, he was jealous of his righteousness, his willingness to do and give the best that he could – his goodness of character.

Because Abel was willing to always do and give his best, Cain was jealous because it highlighted his shortcomings, which led to hate and murder. It is an example of how the world will see us if we live as children of God, with opposition and persecution.

John speaks of love, light and life as belonging together. If we accept the Father, through Jesus the Son, then we have life and he will be with us – as per the promises made in Psalm 23.

To emphasize the concept of love, John has given the ultimate opposite, hatred so severe that it leads to murder. But who here would murder? Jesus has given a grave warning. In Matthew 5:21, whilst delivering the sermon on the Mount, Jesus said “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago “Do not murder and anyone who murders will be subject to judgement”. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement”.

If we “feel” hatred to anyone then it is a negative emotion and will lead to negative actions. We would seek to wish harm on someone, to be actively against them, which would lead to inflicting pain and eventually even murder. Even thinking like that is not pleasing to God.

Love however is a positive emotion, that would lead you to seek the good in them, to be actively for them.

The love commanded by Jesus goes beyond tolerating someone, or hoping for the best for them. The essence of the love of Jesus is self-sacrifice. John states that “Jesus laid down His life for us”. The interpretation of the original Greek word John used may be more accurately written as “laid aside” like divesting oneself of something.

Jesus lay aside hate for anyone, the negative attitude of wishing harm on someone and turned that to seeking good in everyone. For anyone who turns to Him, accepts Him as the Son of God, he will plead their cause before our Father. Jesus willingly forgives them and will be actively rooting for them, leading them. But He also will continue to face rejection and mocking from those who do not accept Him.

Is there sacrifice in that? Is there sacrifice if we decide to lay aside our hate for someone? If you believe that you have a right to hate someone, then you would indeed be laying down your right. But regardless of whether there is a right or not, there is sacrifice in laying down your emotion. You will all have been in a situation where you have experienced a circumstance where hatred has had to be overcome. I certainly have. One person always made themselves look or appear better by highlighting my shortcomings. I had to lay aside my pain, my rejection, my battle with self-esteem, in order to forgive and instead of retaliating to show love, to build up their value as a person. That was self-sacrificial. I made myself vulnerable.

Christ’s crucifixion is not a mere example for us to use in witness of love, but an example of how we ought to love, the depth of which we should be willing to go to show love for others, on His behalf. Dying for someone is the supreme sacrifice, and as you are all here today, I assume have not had to copy! But the lesser offerings of laying aside things, as I shared above, can be just as powerful.

John states that we should give to those in need – and not just talking about it but acting.

To give to those in need should be manifest in our willingness to surrender that which has value in our life in order to enrich the life of another. John switches his emphasis on this passage from using the plural to the use of the singular – no longer brethren “brothers” but to “his brother”.

It is easier to be enthusiastic to help Humanity as a whole rather than to love one individual man or woman – especially if that person is “unattractive” in actions or circumstance. How much easier is it to help the cause of the homeless by supporting a charity, rather than approaching and interacting with someone who is dirty and smelly sitting huddled in a doorway? Supporting charities is a good thing, but please examine your whole motives and actions.

C.S. Lewis wrote “Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular”.

Do you remember last week when I said that John had given the order of revelation for the second coming and what our inheritance will be? Jesus will come – we will see – we will become like Him. It should be the same as for His first coming. He has shown us the way to show the love of God in His actions. He came, we saw, we shall become like Him.

Love is action. It is an inescapable responsibility of a child of God. Jesus gave the example of the good Samaritan. He provided financially for ongoing care in a place of safety.

We need to “see” the need of someone. Not just a passing glimpse and reaching our own conclusion of what they are lacking; but taking the time to truly get to know the need. If you are able to enrich that person’s life, then that is what you should do. It can be costly, but we can and should only give what we actually have – we can only give to someone when we are better off than them.

Giving is often considered “something”, a material thing. Sometimes that may be the case, in Acts 2:44-45 “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need”. But I do not think it should be limited to material items, what about giving time and a listening ear? What about offering prayer? How about praying for healing for them? That was something that Jesus did a lot of – and the disciples in the early church.

It can be scary to put ourselves in that position, making ourselves vulnerable. But we must put our trust in Jesus. Have the life of Christ firmly in the forefront of your mind. He has led by example. That is why it is so important to read the bible, or find ways to listen to scripture. It should be a foundation for our inspiration.

In Mark 5 Jesus came into contact with Jairus, when he was told his daughter had died. Jesus went to her and said “Talitha koum!” then in brackets (which means, Little girl, I say to you, get up!”.

Later in Acts 9 Peter came to Joppa and a disciple named Tabitha had died. Again, in brackets it says that Tabitha was translated into Dorcas, which is what she would have been called. But now it makes it easier for Peter. It meant that Peter could literally copy what Jesus had said before, just changing one letter “Tabitha koum!.

Peter made himself vulnerable, he *laid aside* his fear of his own inability and copied Jesus.

It follows the order of revelation – Jesus came, Peter saw, Peter became like him.

We need to be “seeing” everyone who we meet in order to know their need. If you are in a position to enrich that person’s life, then we should. If we do not, we are not reflecting the love that Christ has for us and wants us to bestow on others. Christ’s love was not just a historical act, but it lives in us, continuing to be active.

Please remember to read this passage with John’s intended background of teaching assurance. John continues in regard to our hearts condemning us. The fact that he has written this implies that it is not unusual. How often do we beat ourselves up about not being able to do enough? We go back and question whether we have given all that we could? That is what John means, that we accuse ourselves of not doing enough.

Sometimes that may well be true, but other times it will be false. But if we continue in this accusation without concluding the truth, then we will again place a barrier between us and God. John is saying that to overcome this obstacle, we need to know the teaching of Jesus, to be settled in our Spirit by applying our head knowledge of circumstances and ultimately being able to stand before God as our judge. We stand before God, recognizing that He is far more merciful on us than we are, and that He will see our motives behind our actions.

If we conclude that we did NOT trust Him, we acted to gain earthly status or approval, or we kept something back out of fear, then as long as we confess that to Him, He will forgive us. He IS full of mercy, so long as we do not try to keep things hidden from Him.

If we have trusted in God to guide us and we have provided help because we want to meet a need; or confessed that we acted for the purpose of what people will think of us, or kept something back as false security, then we can stand.

If we are in a place where able to stand before God, then we will have overcome our own accusations, and our hearts and Spirit will become tranquil and settled. Fellowship with God will again be clear and unhindered – and fellowship is the highest priority.

If you are settled you will have the confidence to boldly come before the Father, just as Jesus showed us on earth, as His child, and not as an accused before a judge, waiting for evidence of wrongdoing to come to light. In this stance of confidence, you have the ability to ask for anything in prayer, trusting that we shall receive. But the caveat to any request is that it must be according to His will. This is where ridding ourselves of all barriers, seeking forgiveness and turning away from things that separate us from Him is vital. We will then be able to enjoy fellowship with Him, that relationship of seeking and learning, through the Holy Spirit, enabling us to seek His will. Sometimes it is difficult to discern between His will and ours, and it can take a long time persevering in prayer for things to be revealed – and sometimes it will not be revealed, just like the details of heaven.

Despite these difficult caveats and situations we experience, we can come before our God. John states the reason is because we obey. But we have to get the correct attitude for the way this works. We do not obey God because we want to earn His love. We should be assured of His love for us, so that we want to be in His presence – accept our relationship as a child with our heavenly Father. If we accept that relationship, we will have the desire to obey God.

Even in the mystery that surrounds so much of our faith, our desire is to know God better so that we may please Him. Not to please Him out of religion or some kind of formula of knowledge, or to please Him to avoid His anger; but to desire to please Him because we love Him.

Faith in Christ is a decisive act, a decision made once; love is a continuous attitude, and obedience will come from abiding in God, reading the Word, spending time in prayer, soaking up His teaching – just like the grape is the fruit of the vine, soaking up the nutrients and goodness from the root as its source, so will our actions of love come from fellowship with God.