

How We Know What Love Is

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Scripture: 1 John 3:16-24

¹⁶ We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷ How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

¹⁸ Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹ And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²² and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

²³ And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴ All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

In a world where we are given more news of conflict, sadness and hate than of people coming together, and of joys and love, the words from 1 John 3 are a powerful reminder of how we experience and know what love is. When thinking of what love is, my mind filled up with memories of how I felt loved throughout my life. I thank God that I continue to feel such love every day. Looking back at my life, I see how I was so loved from when I was a child with the love of my parents who lovingly raised me, provided for me, taught me, encouraged me, corrected and disciplined me, and among so many other things made sure I had the opportunity to grow in my faith and love for God. I experienced love through my family, church families, friends, and even total strangers who God allowed to come into my life.

Having grown up and lived in various places in Michigan, a few years in southern California, half a year in Korea before going to Washington, D.C., where I lived and attended seminary for 5 years before returning to Michigan, I experienced God’s love through so many people. No doubt I experienced an abundant love with the beginning of my own family with Jamie and our three children.

How about you? How have you experienced love throughout your life? How can you say that you know what love is? Take a moment to pause now to allow your mind to recall memories from long ago or as recent as the other day of how you have experienced love.

Some of us have experiences of love that were through the acts of sacrifices that cost someone for one moment or for a longer period of time. In some cases, the love given and shared was a lifelong endeavor. For those of you who have had grandparents or older family members or friends who you’ve known since you could remember as a child, you know of this love from such people your entire life, until they have to say goodbye one day. What an amazing gift that is for those of us who have known such love from someone.

Most of you know my story with regards to my grandparents. I had only one grandparent when I was born. My paternal grandmother who lived in Korea while we lived in the U.S. was the only grandparent I knew. I have a few memories of her since my family only saw her a few times throughout my life. There was a time I remember when she stayed with us in Michigan when I was very young. Another time was when I was in high school when our entire family went to Korea for a short time. Then again between graduating from college and beginning my seminary education when I lived in Korea for 6 months. During that longer stay in Korea I was able to spend time with her. What a gift that was for me and her! The most powerful experience was when I discovered why I had the feeling before deciding to go to Korea that I had to change my original plans to spend those 6 six months in another country to teach English. So I spent time in Korea to get to know my extended family more, learn more about my own culture, and to take the time I felt I needed before beginning the next stage of my life as I entered full-time ministry.

Though I did not have the experience of being loved by my grandmother as other grandchildren had, I learned in my time with her how much she had always loved me as only a grandmother could, even when time and distance was between us for much of the time. It was while I was there that my grandmother began to end her life on earth and begin her life in heaven. When my father flew to Korea as soon as he could, she had already passed away by the time he arrived. I told my dad I was sorry he missed her. What he said next confirmed that I was moved by God to change my plans to be in Korea rather than somewhere else. My dad told me that it was ok since I was there for him and our family when his mother died, and that gave him peace of mind and heart. That experience grew my understanding and experiences of love, God's love.

Sure, sometimes love seems to be a strange feeling and experience because sometimes it cannot be fully explained or even expressed. But when you feel it, you cannot deny it. And when you express it as fully as you possibly can, you cannot deny the power of such love within you.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we know what love is. We know God is the source of the greatest love of all. God is love! And we are reminded in today's scripture reading that we are able to know what love is because Christ gave his life in order to save us. Jesus laid his life down for us so that we would be freed from the slavery to sin and given the promise of eternal life.

Sometimes we forget how great God's love is for us. You may have noticed that the verse 1 John 3:16 has the same message of love as John 3:16, which tells us that God so loved the world that he gave his only son...to save us!

In saving us, we were also given our mission from Jesus Christ, the Great Commission of making disciples for him. The most powerful way to make disciples of Christ is by proclaiming the Good News, as found in 1 John 3:16 and John 3:16 with loving actions. We are told that just as Jesus laid his life down for us, we are to lay our lives down for others. This does not mean we look for opportunities to literally die for others, though in very rare occasions people

are in such positions to make that choice. We are rather being told to lay our lives down for one another by how we treat others, what we do unto others, and through our actions.

Again, laying our lives down is not in how we give up our lives in literally dying, but rather in how we live out our love for God and others. It's in how we care for those in need, the needs that are physical, emotional, mental, financial, or some other form that all are spiritual acts caring for the heart, mind, body and soul. Those needs could be met in part or in whole by simply sitting with someone as they need, listening to them with care and empathy, being angry with them for something that shouldn't have happened, standing with them when they are being harmed or persecuted in one way or another, or in praying with them when they don't know what else to do.

How do others know what love is? Just as we have and continue to experience God's love, and that is through the acts of others. We must remember that what we do unto others is the way in which we communicate Christ's love, the love we have received from God.

The love we have from God is that of actions, not only of words. Love is not love without acts of love. They go hand-in-hand. Just as it is with faith, as we are told James 2:17, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." This does not mean that we work to be saved. We know that Christ could only do that work of saving us and that is by grace that we have been saved, not by anything we have done, as written in Ephesians 2:8-9.

When it comes to acting in love, there are times we are easily moved to loving action such as in doing things out of love for family and friends. On occasion we don't even give it a second thought in making sacrifices to help someone we love. Then there are times when we really struggle with acting in love due to the complexity of the situation, concerns or fears of being misinterpreted, or fears of being judged for seemingly taking sides. That is why we are told in today's verses that we cannot claim to have love if we see someone in need and do nothing to help when we are able to. Again, such needs are not only material or financial, but they can be in the forms of standing with those in need of people who need you to be present in their lives, speaking up for those whose voices are not heard, supporting those by prayer, calls, and even shouts for help and justice when needed.

Some of the most difficult times to act in love when it comes to a brother or sister in need is when it is in calling out the wrong actions of another brother or sister. If you have spent enough time with a group of people, whether it's with a family, among friends, colleagues or other group of people or community, you'll inevitably find yourself witnessing or in a conflict at one point or another. Sometimes your actions are not so difficult for others to take since your position as a parent or leader or mediator calls for you to speak up to correct a wrong, make peace between other members of the group, or between siblings. Thinking about siblings made me remember having to tell my very young twin boys at one point that they were never to bite the other or anyone else when one of my boys bit the other. Of course the other boy retaliated later by biting back. So we had to appropriately love our children while still disciplining and teaching them what was acceptable and not. This was not only to protect them from each other,

but from others who could have been the victim of their new tiny but very sharp and powerful teeth and jaws.

In our world today, and as God calls us all his children, we find ourselves witnessing and even being a part of the “biting” that goes on in our families and communities. In a world that usually goes from being hurt to being filled with hate, may we remember that our actions are to be in following the way and life of Jesus Christ and his love. Though not everyone follows the way of Christ’s love, we can be those who exemplify and point to Christ and his amazing love. Sometimes this can seem impossible. That is when we must remember to show that the love of God through Jesus Christ is that love that overcame what was impossible for us. Christ’s love not only died for us but forgave us from our sins, allows for us to live for him on earth, and grants us life eternal in heaven one day.

Because of what Christ did for us, we surely know what love is. With such great love lavishly poured out on us, we are called to lay our lives for one another through our actions.

Though we can answer quite easily how we have experienced love from God and others, I ask how your actions have shared Christ’s love to others? How have and do others experience God’s love through you? How do you overcome the times you fear act in love because of upsetting some people?

What helps when those times of fear come is to remember what Christ did for you, how he suffered the shame, abuse, ridicule, and death on the cross for you and your sins in order to save you. And also remember that what we do unto others we do unto Christ. (Matthew 25:40)

So we are loving Christ in how we love one another, especially when you’re tempted to refuse to help for one reason or another. One of the major issues in our country that has been part of our country’s history since even before it’s birth with independence has been that of racial injustice. It’s a sad fact of our country that prides itself in freedom and justice. With a rich history of being a country that fights for freedom and justice, we also have a history of slavery and racial inequality, injustice, and violence. The most recent and publicized example of this was with the recent guilty murder conviction of ex-officer Derek Chauvin who killed George Floyd for allegedly using a fake \$20 bill. In this terrible and sad event, Chauvin had to be called to account for his. During his trial, and with all the reports of such incidents of deaths of people from as young as 13 even during his trial and day of conviction, it could be misunderstood that people are calling all police officers bad. We know this is not true. We know there are so many police officers who daily put their lives on the line to serve and protect. By supporting the Chauvin family and all who are part of the Black community that have lived with such racial violence is not anti-police. When we see how we treat other is how we treat Christ, we can empathize more with how the victims and victims’ families simply do not want to have their loved ones killed when they should have been treated more fairly, others who are not black are usually treated with a warning, being appropriated and non-violently arrested, or whatever is fitting to the situation. Too often has our country’s history been filled with the crying out of certain groups of people, especially Black, Brown, Indigenous and communities of

color of being treated unequally, ending in deaths that should never have happened. From such deaths and mourning comes not only outcries but also protest and the unfortunate riots.

How do we respond in ways that are in line with God's command to believe in and follow Christ and to love one another?

This no doubt can seem like a most difficult answer when it looks like you have to take sides. However, look at it this way. There were police chiefs, other officers, and first responders who testified in the trial of Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd who said what Chauvin did in kneeling on Floyd's neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds was not only excessive but the purposeful act that killed Floyd. They said it was not what they stand for as police officers. And the medical team who stood there while other officers prevented them from intervening were tortured with pain and helplessness as they watched George being killed right before their eyes.

It was and is not about whether you are for or against cops. It is about accountability for how an officer who was to serve and protect broke that vow and acted in direct opposition to what all police officers have committed to do. By calling Chauvin to account, it spoke to how his actions disrespected the honor of all the many officers who serve their communities faithfully and honorably day in and day out. The action of Chauvin was not worthy of all the other good officers. With Chauvin's conviction, it is also the upholding the morals and high standards of all who wear a badge. It's not only about justice, which Floyd's family wish they never had to endure of the lost their loved one. They may have gotten some justice, but they didn't feel they did because they just wanted George back, whom they will never get back.

We all do not want such senseless losses of lives to happen again and again. But when they do, how do we act in love?

May our actions be that of loving one another and be in step with how Christ calls us to lay our lives down for one another. Let us also pray for one another when we feel we are pitted against one another. May we see how Christ died for us at the hands of those who claimed to love God, those who wanted to rule by and for power, and those who thought it had to be a choice between "us and them." May we see how Christ loved and laid his life down for each and every one of them, evidenced when he said on the cross "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Let us also find the courage to act in love and not simply say it then refuse to meet the needs of our brothers and sisters when we are able to act. For when we learn to do so, then we'll discover that we are loving and helping one another and everyone. Every little and big act of loving one another is how we answer the question of what love is for those who witness and experience your acts of love in the name of Christ, God's amazing and sacrificial love for them. Amen.