

A Healthy Gospel Church

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[0 : 00] So, today we're going to look back, continue looking at this letter that John wrote under the inspiration of God that remains God's word for us and to us, living and powerful and active in our lives.

The Free Church of Scotland has a vision statement for the whole denomination, and the vision statement is a healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland.

And that's a broader vision than just for the Free Church. It recognizes there's lots of healthy churches and there's a need for lots of different kind of healthy churches throughout Scotland, but we want to play our part in that.

And I've taken that statement and made that the title for the sermon this morning based on the scripture we're reading. I wonder what you would include as a significant and important characteristic of a healthy church.

Maybe a good minister who preaches the gospel. Maybe a passion for evangelism. Great praise.

[1 : 10] Lots of amazing friends, good community. Living in this epistle, remember John's an old man, an old man, probably the last of the living apostles who's seen it all.

He mentions nothing about these things in this letter. I'm not saying they're not important. He mentions nothing about the nine marks or the three marks of a Reformed church, words, circumambulance, discipline.

Doesn't really mention anything specifically in that way. And so I want to be provocative because I think in some ways John was being provocative as well. And I'm going to speak about the one mark of the church that I probably would guarantee that none of us would have consciously prioritized as a mark of a true church, the mark of a New Testament Bible-believing, spirit-filled church.

A church where members are willing to lay down their lives for each other. That's the great mark of the church that John is speaking of here.

Chapter verse 16 is what I'm going to focus on mainly today as the summary of not just this section but indeed of the whole letter.

[2 : 37] By this we know love that He laid down His life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

Verse 16 of chapter 3 is almost bang in the middle of this letter. If I had the time, I would have counted all the letters that are in the whole book and seen exactly how near to the middle of this letter that this statement comes.

It's almost like a hub of a wheel where everything else that He says comes from this verse in this letter that He's speaking about. And I wonder whether that should be the vision statement of St. Columbus.

Wouldn't that be quite a provocative and interesting and challenging vision statement, not just for people outside, but probably much more for ourselves as believers that as a church we are willing to lay down our lives for one another.

Lay down our lives for one another. And it stems from what we've experienced of the love of God in our own hearts and lives. Now in 1987, and that's before at least three-quarters of this congregation was born probably.

[3 : 53] Yeah, I'm sure that's the case. There was a song that came out in the charts by a group that was taking a parody of, or making a parody of Star Trek, which even some of the younger ones will have heard about, I'm sure.

But before it was a series of films, it was a series on the TV. And I think the group were called Star Trekking. That may have been the name of the song, I'm not sure. But one of the lines in the song was, it's live Jim, but not as we know it.

And if you know that song, you'll remember that was quite a significant part of the song. Well, what I'm arguing today is that a healthy gospel church has love at the very core, love at the center, but it's love not as we know it.

It's love Jim, not as we know it. It's a different kind of love. And I want to look at that for a little bit this morning and look at the motive behind verse 16, the different love that's spoken of in this passage throughout this letter, which we're going to say a lot more about.

Because what he's not speaking about, and I think this is very important, because we all feel in many ways, I guess, that we're all experts in love. We all know a lot about love.

[5 : 06] But what he's not speaking about is generally he's not speaking about the kind of loves that we enjoy in this life, which are still a gift from God, but they're not the kind of love that's been spoken of here.

In other words, not family love. Many of you are really close to your families, your mums and dads, your brothers and sisters. And where there's that sense that it's a really powerful thing and very real to us.

But it's not that kind of love he's speaking of. Nor is it romantic love or sexual love, which is equally powerful where there's this great intimacy and belonging and purpose and friendship that keeps us going.

But it's not that love he's speaking about. Nor is it indeed friendship love, the kind of love that binds us together with people that we maybe have a common interest with or who reciprocate our love, who are worth it, who have character traits that we enjoy, maybe a sense of humor or whatever it might be.

Now, all of these are good. All of these are important. All of these are really significant for us in life. They're mainly characterized by that sense of give and take, mainly a love that's worth it, a love that's earned or a love that is blood related in many ways.

[6 : 23] But what the New Testament has done, and what God has done for us in the New Testament, is reimagined a word that existed in the Greek language already, a word that didn't mean any of these other loves.

And it's reimagined, a kind of neutral word, and it's been taken up by the New Testament writers, and it's been used to describe the unique expression of love that goes against all our natural loves and against all our natural instincts in many ways.

But that is the defining mark of the believer that sets the believer apart with this spectacular and different gifted love that we're given when we come to Jesus Christ.

It's a defining mark in the believer. The believer who's come from death to life spiritually, from darkness to light, who's been reborn, and we'll say a little bit about that as well, by the Spirit.

And it's taken that word, and you know it's a kori word. That's why we took them back, because it's the great word agape.

[7 : 33] Now, I can tell how new this congregation has become by how many people aren't smiling at that, because they have no idea what I'm talking about.

But when Kori was here first time, he became famed for using that word in every single sermon. Not quite, but he used it a lot, and that's why we take them back, because it's such a significant word.

It's the great word of God's divine love that is given to the unlovely, to the unworthy, that can't be earned and is selfless.

And it's a critical truth here that John wants to get across, and the Holy Spirit wants to get across to us as well, the significance of receiving this love, of living out this love, not just for God, but for one another.

So I'm going to do something I don't often do. I'm going to do a kind of word study in a few words in this passage, because it's so important. So you see the first one is this word, agape, this word love that is used here in verse 16.

[8 : 43] By this we know love that he laid down his life for us, so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. It's used 27 times in this very short letter, this word.

Now that's way above any other letter in the New Testament that usage. And it's used in John's gospel, John the same writer of the gospel, uses it 39 times, and that's more than double the usage in any of the other gospels.

It's something that is used all the time by John. It's more than 174 verses in this short letter, because it's so significant and so important to him, the self-sacrificial serving of others, putting the

worship of God and the needs of others before ourselves is what he's saying, is that we lay down our lives for one another.

It's utterly counterintuitive. You maybe would do it for someone who's your flesh and blood. You maybe would do it for your best friend. You maybe do it for your wife or husband, your lover.

But we've been asked to do this to our brothers and sisters in Christ, for our brothers and sisters in Christ. It's not a suggestion, it's not a feeling, it's a command that we are commanded to do.

[10:04] And we're to lay down our lives for our fellow Christians because we are to respond to them in the way Christ responded to us. Christ became death in his perfection so that we could put to death the sins that he died for.

The disorder loves the selfishness, the division, the natural loves. He says, in Christ we have a different love, and it's a love that is reflective of Christ and it is a love that is reflective of the new birth in us.

And we do that, and we're to love this way because of the example of Jesus Christ. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us.

It's because of what God has done that we are motivated as believers to live this way towards one another. God isn't a distant autocrat for us as Christians, he might be for others, but he's not for us. God is this, he's not the God who flings ten commandments at us and throws at us rules, words and speech that just, he asks us to believe.

[11:18] He saw that humanity was lost and sinful and spiritually dead and recognized the only answer, the only answer to his justice that demanded that the price be paid for rebellion and sin and his great love for us.

And you know this, the only answer that fused his justice and love was for him to become flesh and blood. To live in humiliation, God hidden, to die as God abandoned and cursed in your place in mine, to rise again as God my Savior, to offer me new life.

It's an inconceivable love that is spoken of, it's inconceivably costly for the Son of God to do this on our behalf.

Especially because there's nothing in me like all the natural loves we speak about that attract us to one another. But especially because there's nothing in me but spiritual emptiness and need, impotence, powerlessness, ugliness and wrongdoing before the living God in my heart.

God the Son on the cross, and I say this with all reverence, you simply couldn't make it up. Why would you?

[12:47] If it's not true, we recognize this unimaginable love and it's the motive for us. And John knows that, he's called the apostle of love.

And in these 27 references to this agape love that he makes, he is reminding us not only of what God has done for us, but therefore in Christ when we believe and when we trust in Him, this transforms how we look at the world and how we look primarily, and this is focused this morning, on our fellow Christians.

It does transform even our natural loves. It should do. Our love for husband and wife, our love for siblings, our love for our friends. It transforms all of that.

And it also births a different kind of love in us. So that when we think of the church and we think of a healthy gospel church, what we don't think about, when we don't think about a family of Christians, we don't look for well-adjusted, attractive, similar, decent people.

The Christian is the deepest revolutionary that's living, because we don't look at community and gospel community that way.

[14:09] We are people who are moved by others who are in need, by others who fail, by others who struggle, by others who naturally we would maybe not be friends with and not be in communion with.

We serve them, and we put to death ourselves in order to put them first, because we've put God first in our hearts. And that is...

If you don't see that as an utterly and completely radical revolutionary way of thinking, then you're a better person than I, for sure, absolutely.

And when we think about this, let's not just keep it theoretical, because John doesn't allow us to do that, because he immediately, as a follow-on from verse 16, he goes on practically to explain exactly what he means by this laying down your life for others.

And he's not probably madly talking about martyrdom, he's talking about laying down that selfishness and a self-focused life that doesn't care about other people.

[15:21] And he says, but if anyone in the world's goods and sees his brother in need yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but indeed and in truth.

What a great couple of sentences there. He's saying that to lay down our lives is to be generous towards others, before being generous towards ourselves, is putting them first, and that might mean for us materially giving generously to those who are in need.

That may become something that's more significant in the days and weeks that lie ahead, because of the situation economically we find ourselves in. But it may be also the giving of ourselves generously in our time, or in our patience, or in our forgiveness, or in our knowledge, you know, the discipleship that we've been speaking about, the grace groups, that we may be spending time with people new in the faith who don't know very much, and we give them our time and we teach them and we help them and we learn from others at the same time.

And that gives us a presupposition within a verse like this for the church, for you and for me, is that we take the time and the energy to actually know one another.

One has the world's good and sees his brother in need. There's just a presupposition there that we've bothered to take the time to find out people's brothers and sisters' circumstances, that we're not islands, that we're not just bubbles within a group, but we are a people, family together, bound by the love of God and by our understanding of what he has done for us.

[17:08] Just laying down our lives is being responsive, it's being put out, oh my word, it's being inconvenienced. It's being the servant of other people, because God was inconvenienced for us.

God was put out for us, and God was responsive and served us in the most remarkable way. And as we do so, it's a great assurance in verses 18 and 19, we don't have time to look at this really. It's this truth that assures our heart that we belong, that we're able to love in this way, that we're able to not just love in the way that we're naturally able to love, but love in this remarkable, divinely inspired and motivated and a spirit-filled way that transforms who we are and what we do.

So love, that's the one word I want to look at. And there's another couple of words I want to look at, more briefly. And two words, message and beginning.

Okay? We're kind of looking at words that are used a lot by John or are significant within this letter. And the first verse we read today was, for this is the message you've heard from the beginning.

[18:21] Now he uses the word beginning a whole lot in this letter, seven times he uses it. He talks about, let's go back to a couple of them, one verse one, that which we've heard from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we've looked upon, which we have touched with our hands concerning the word of life, speaking of Jesus.

And then in two, verse seven, we have, beloved, I'm writing to you, a new commandment, not an old commandment, but an old commandment rather, that you had from the beginning. And so he uses it in different ways throughout this letter.

And it all goes back to the truth, the truth of Jesus Christ, the foundational message. Now Ephesians 2 speaks about that, that the truth of Christ is based, or the gospel is based on the foundation of the prophets and the apostles, and the truth of Jesus Christ Himself being the cornerstone, being the very center of it.

He also refers in the beginning, in this letter, to the devil being a sinner from the beginning. And so he's going back to foundations, reminding us of this one truth that has always been, it hasn't changed, but from the beginning, there is this great truth that he wants people to bed their lives on and bed their hope on.

It's an unchanging truth. And so that beginning that he speaks about is linked to the other word, which is the message. He speaks about it in one verse five and two, verse seven, and here in three, verse 11, this is the message you've heard from the beginning.

[19:57] This is what you've heard, God is light, he says in verse chapter one, this is the message. And he says, because we have come into the light, therefore, to verse seven, that we love one another as believers.

And he says that it's a new commandment. He also says it's an old commandment. It's one which is from the beginning, one which John heard from Jesus. We read about that previously in John's Gospel, where Jesus gives him this new commandment.

What's new about the commandment to love one another? What makes it the 13th commandment? Sorry, the 11th commandment, second to 12 disciples, sorry. What makes it the 11th commandment?

He says love one another as I've loved you. So it's new in the sense that it's in response to what Jesus has done for us.

And that is the foundation we have, that is the word, that is the truth. And if you take time, if you took maybe 25 minutes, 30 minutes, I don't know how long it would take, just to read through the letter of John, you would just be struck by how repetitive it is.

[21 : 06] He keeps on repeating this. It's so important to him, so significant. And we have to, it's important because we remember the context of false teaching, new teaching that wasn't genuine and wasn't of Christ and was changing the gospel, but also false teaching that was causing division and hatred and separation and people leaving and going their own way.

And it was critical and gossiping and careless and disinterested and unresponsive and proud. And he was saying, no, that keeps repeating, he keeps saying again and again.

No, that is not what we are. That is not who we are as believers. We're different. From the beginning we have this message and this message transforms us and changes us.

And we are encouraged to remember that, that this agape love is unique to the message that we have taken from the beginning and receive. It doesn't change because it's real as opposed to just a kind of theological treatise that we've made up as we've gone along.

So message and beginning. And the last thing I want to speak about is brothers that he speaks here in verse 16 about it, by this, we know his love that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our life for our brothers.

[22 : 31] Now is that word there, is that evidence of the patriarchal nature of the church? Is it a get out of jail free card for all the sisters among us that we're not bound by, they're not bound by that?

Absolutely not. The word brothers here translated variously and it can be translated brothers and sisters because that is what is behind it.

It covers all believers, okay? In the same way that the church is the bride of Christ. It covers all believers, male and female as well. And for what we need to remember that in its context, this word that was used brothers, well, it means this, it's not just in its context, but within the context that it becomes significant, the word literally means from the same womb, from the same womb.

And that's one of the reasons why he uses this word because he connects it with being reborn. And indeed six times he uses the new birth concept in this small letter as well, because he's reminding us that it's a spiritual, impossible rebirth that comes from God.

You must remember, we looked at it recently, with regard to the Holy Spirit, he must be born again. And he's saying that for the believer it's the same common experience.

[24 : 00] We all come from the same spiritual womb as it were. We are born anew of the spirit. And he's reminding us that being a Christian is not institutional.

It's not simply being moral or ethical in any certain way. It's certainly not just going to church or being good as if we could be good in the eyes of God at least enough to be redeemed.

It's being reborn and having our whole perspective, our whole life, our whole vision, everything that we are radically turned upside down and changed by becoming children of the Most High God.

And we share that with every single believer across the globe, from whatever background, whatever tradition, if they have come to know Christ as Lord and Savior, we belong to that.

And the church family, therefore, is not simply a social gathering of like-minded people at a human level.

[25 : 06] There is a like-mindedness because of the Spirit of God bringing us to living faith. But it must be that we take who we are and allow ourselves to be transformed by the grace and by the love of God, not just that we come from the same womb spiritually as brothers, but also therefore that we have the same Father.

And that really takes us, in many ways, full circle, even though we're only halfway through the letter to chapter 1 and verse 2 and 3, which Corrie preached on a few weeks, going to reminded us again with the focus of the letter, that which we have seen and heard and proclaimed to you, so that you may too have fellowship with us.

And indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things that our joy may be complete. So what He's wanting us to remember and be reminded of is

that we share the same Father, the same elder brother, Jesus, and the same Spirit who is reborn, given His rebirth.

So Christ has enabled us to have a new relationship with God, the Father. And as we fellowship with Him, the great mark of that is that we fellowship with one another.

We don't turn our backs on one another. We don't think one another are insignificant or important, or that we are islands, that we are people who fellowship with one another because we fellowship with the Father that is common to us.

[26 : 36] And we work at becoming dead to our sinful selfishness and even to the disordered loves that will help us to pick and choose who we love in the church.

Well, they're nice guys. They're good people. They've been decent to me. They've never done me wrong. They've never spoken against me. I've not been hurt by them. These are all natural ways of treating one another, but we're actually to be tremendously different to become dead to that way of thinking and to lay down our lives for our fellow Christians, to serve them sacrificially and in a way that may well be inconvenienced for us.

The false teachers of John's Day, they divided, they walked away. They were envious. They were jealous. They wanted power and influence. They didn't know the Father.

They didn't know His love. It was a different gospel. So we're called today and we're encouraged to, and I hope that we're inspired and maybe sometimes challenged.

I certainly am, to lay down my life for you. Not in theory, but literally, not literally in terms of martyrdom or though that may be the case, but ordinarily putting your needs before mine, serving you.

[28 : 06] What a challenge that is. And we think sometimes we can live our Christian lives without prayer and without dependence on the Spirit.

How can we do so? How can we do so? It's unbelievably impossible to love this way unless we are allowing the Holy Spirit to transform our hearts.

So a healthy church then at its core is not a church that has a checklist of healthy characteristics. It's not about what a body of people can offer you primarily. Fundamentally it's about you.

A healthy church starts with you and it starts with me. It starts with our hearts being transformed and laying down self. Now I know there's lots of other things that we can think about.

[29 : 12] But when we have that vision of God transforming us and us serving other people as a summary, as a fulfillment of the whole law of God that we're given right from the beginning that we can't possibly do without Him, with that vision then our praise, our worship, the preaching, the evangelism, the sacraments, the discipline, it all begins to fall into place.

So we have this great command. Verse 23, same section. This you have and I have as believers a command.

This is His commandment that we believe on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another just as He commanded us.

Command, love one another, command. A command sandwich and love is right there in the middle. And that is what we're called to do. And it's impossible unless we're dependent on the Holy Spirit and are born afresh, born in you, born from above.

If you're not, and I would challenge you to consider that as the most significant reality that you need to face and come to terms with and deal with and come to know Jesus, who loves you more than anyone will ever be able to love you with His unique love, even though there's nothing worthy in you or there certainly wasn't anything worthy in me.

[30 : 54] That enables us to love one another in that way. Let's pray. Father, God help us to love you the way you want us to do. And keep us from frustration, Lord, and from despair thinking, well, I can never do that or make such a mess of that.

I've been useless at that. And that's okay, Lord, because that is exactly what we feel. But may it drive us to prayer and drive us to dependence on you, to have our eyes open, to live in the light, to keep your commands, because of what you've done for us.

Walk that way of blessing, that way of forgiveness and that way of learning. And help us to put to death the things that divide us, that cause us to be divided from one another, covetous or selfish or gossiping or anything that comes so easily to us.

Help us to deal with them. We pray. And know that our walk with you is such an everyday thing. Didn't even look today, Lord, at loving our enemies or loving those who resist us and that great

command to bless those who persecute us.

It's all wrapped up, Lord, in this and help us, we pray, to see it and live it and do it for Jesus' sake.
Amen.