

Christ – the Focus of Our Faith

Today and this coming week are busy times here at New Hope. We've just heard from a high school senior who has a dream to share the Gospel as a missionary. She's offering a beautiful gift of worship through service to the Lord. A little later this morning, we'll dedicate – actually we'll consecrate – another beautiful gift of worship – the stained glass cross.

Later this week, on Saturday, we'll come together to celebrate the life of our sister, Susan. I didn't realize it, but Susan was a member here at New Hope for fifteen years. She actually transferred her membership over from a United Methodist Church in Whitehall, Indiana. We're going to need help in the kitchen, and probably some desserts, so we can show some love to her family. Through all of the events, as long as we stay focused on the cross of Christ, making Him known, and loving people – God will continue to bless us and be with us.

In thinking about Christ being the focus of our faith, I want to get back into John's first letter – picking up on some of what we talked of last week, but elaborating on what our role is, as followers of Jesus. If you have your Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to 1 John 3:16-24. **Read 1 John 3:16-24.**

Following Jesus is Hard

Last week we read the first seven verses of this chapter. In those verses, the apostle encouraged us to think about the great love God has poured out on us through Jesus Christ. He also says that over time we should begin to look and act more and more like Jesus. He expands on this idea today. "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters," (1 John 3:16).

"But what if I don't much care for my brother or sister?" We might ask. Well, we're told here to do it anyways. That's a hard thing to do. Especially when the brother or sister don't act very loving towards us. But we ought to do the hard work of loving them anyhow.

It reminds me of an old hymn, that says in part, "God hath not promised skies always blue, Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through; God hath not promised sun without rain, Joy without sorrow, peace without pain. But God hath promised strength for the day, Rest for the labor, light for the way; Grace for the trials, help from above, Unfailing sympathy, undying love."¹ Following Jesus Christ, and being reshaped into

¹ Annie Johnson Flint & William Runyan, *What God Hath Promised*, in *Hymns of Faith*, (Wheaton: Tabernacle Publishing, 1980), page 449.

better image-bearers of Him is hard work – but it has eternal rewards! Notice what John writes next. He says, “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?” (verse 17).

That’s a real good question, which more people following Jesus need to be thinking and praying over. Most of you know that we go down to the Alpha Center once every three or four months to provide a meal and devotional message to some of the poorest people in Shelby County. The people down there have told me on numerous occasions that they enjoy when we’re there, because they know they’re going to get good food. They’ve also said that some local churches here in Shelby County – and I’m not going to name names – act like they’re more of a nuisance or a bother, and show it with what they give, or don’t give, to them.

The Heart as a Moral Compass

See, there are a lot of people running around doing what the writer says next. “Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth,” (verse 18). We have to be careful that we don’t do that. Just pay lip service to loving people – because when we do, we become what all those people outside the Church love to say about church people – “they’re hypocrites.” There are times, when I look back on things, and I see that I’ve been a hypocrite. I may have been able to do something to help someone else, and didn’t, because I was too “me focused.”

And I bet, if you’re being brutally honest with yourself this morning, you can see the same thing in hindsight in your life. “This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in His presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and He knows everything,” (verses 19-20). This is what John’s getting at here with the heart business. Of course, in the original Greek manuscripts, the word used for “heart” in these verses is “kardia,” which is where we get the word “cardio,” or “cardiac.”

But the Greek language is multi-layered. We miss this in our English translations of the Bible. He’s not talking so much about the heart inside us that pumps blood that sometimes goes bad. When our hearts – physical hearts – go bad, who do we see? A cardiologist. A heart doctor.

What John’s talking about here, which we would really get from it if we could read and understand that original Greek is more along the lines of our consciences. That decision-making thing inside us that is like a moral compass telling us what’s right and wrong. This is where it gets really cool, and really practical for us today. When we’ve set ourselves on Jesus Christ, if our hearts – our consciences, or moral compasses – condemn us because we know we’ve messed up, we’ve done wrong, God’s bigger than all that. He knows everything.

We Abide in Christ

And He loves us anyhow – with all our flaws. Notice what comes next in the passage. “Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from Him anything we ask; because we keep His commands and do what pleases Him,” (verses 21-22). This is the beauty of the cross. We’re messed up people, and even while we were still sinners – enemies of God – Christ died for us. Paul tells us that in his letter to the Church at Rome (5:8).

I want to point out one thing here, before we go on. John says, “we have confidence before God and receive from Him anything we ask,” (1 John 3:21b-22a). Now that doesn’t mean if we pray and ask God for \$1 million, that He’s going to give it to us. More likely than not, that’s not going to happen. If we ask Him for material possessions for self-aggrandizement, that doesn’t line up with His will for us. He doesn’t want us to be selfish. Rather, we’re to be selfless, and living and acting like servants to others.

That’s not the main focus for today, though. What’s really important to take away from this passage today is what John tells us next – because there may be people wondering, “Well, what commandments of God do I have to keep?” John makes them crystal clear for us. He writes, “And this is His command: to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as He commanded us. The one who keeps God’s commands lives in Him, and He in them. And this is how we know that He lives in us: We know it by the Spirit He gave us,” (verses 23-24). It’s the same thing Jesus said in the Gospels, when the man asked Him which of the commandments were the greatest, and Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself,” (Mark 12:28-31). To truly be followers of Jesus means that we abide in Him. Everything we do, think, and say ought to reflect His life, revealed through the Scriptures, to the world.

Prayer: Shepherd of all, by laying down Your life for Your flock You reveal Your love for all. Lead us from the place of death to the place of abundant life, that guided by Your care for us, we may rightly offer our lives in love for You and our neighbors. Amen.