

1 John 3 – Part R

1 John 3:16-17

¹Jn 3:16 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren. ¹⁷ But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?

Once again, John says in v16 that believers “**know**” something. In this case, he says that they know what love actually is because of what Christ did for them when “**He laid down his life**”. Now, what we want to recognize that is not readily apparent is that the Greek word for “**know**” in v16 is different than the Greek word for “**know**” in v14. V14 was “*oida*” and v16 is “*ginosko*” which refers to what someone knows from their personal experience. The word is in the perfect tense which means that the individual came to a certain knowledge at a particular point in time in the past and they still know what it is that they learned. The perfect tense speaks of a permanence of knowledge. In other words, what the person learned in the past is something that is still impacting their life in the present. At a personal level, what I learned about Christ 45 years ago is something that is still impacting my life today. The knowledge that I gained when I came to Christ had a permanent and life transforming effect on my life. That is what the perfect tense is indicating – the permanent effect of what someone knows from personal experience. What does not come out in the use of the perfect tense, however, is that it clearly implies that what the individual has learned continually grows and develops in their life.¹ In other words, the knowledge that someone gains is a knowledge that creates within them a deep desire to know more and to incorporate what they have learned more and more into their life.

What I learned about Christ on the night that I was personally saved has grown and developed and matured more and more and more – and it should be the same for everyone who has truly been saved. What I thought was utterly wonderful and life transforming on that night continues to flourish and abound in my heart. That is the effect of the perfect tense in a person's life. Unfortunately, modern Christianity has made all of this very stationary, almost dormant, and spiritually stagnant. It is as if personal faith in Christ is just a kind of theoretical faith, but not something that really works in real life. Obviously that is a tremendous lie of the enemy and only produces what could be called a dead faith or “**always learning, but never coming to the knowledge of the truth**”. The church has offered people membership and provided programs and facilities to accommodate their personal needs, but in the process they have depleted salvation of its meaning and joy. So, we have to ask the question as to what was it in the case of [1 John 3:16](#) that the individual actually came to know? The lost person came to the true knowledge of what Christ was actually doing when He gave His life for them. They became the recipients of Christ's payment for their sin and the corresponding and eternal forgiveness of those sins. That is what the individual came to know and realize at the moment of salvation. Up until that point they did not know or recognize that they were “**dead in their sins and trespasses**” and that their life was under the very wrath of God. So, what John is going to say as he develops this passage through v23 is that if the knowledge that was gained was truly believed and the individual was genuinely saved, then the evidence of their salvation will be that they will also demonstrate their love for other believers. If I can say it this way, it is inevitable. It is inescapable and certain that this should happen in every believer's life that they have a genuine love for other believers. Then in v19, John will say that this love for the brethren will also provide assurance to the believer that they are truly saved.

So, what was it that Christ actually did? John says that “**He laid down his life for us**”. In [John 10:11](#) and [John 10:17–18](#) Jesus said these words,

Jn 10:11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.

Jn 10:17 Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father."

What is important to glean from these kind of verses is that no one actually took the life of Christ from Him. If you simply read the historical account of the death of Christ, it would appear that He was just a helpless victim of a very cruel religious system. However, that was not at all what happened. To the exact contrary, Christ was completely in control of everything that surrounded His arrest, His trial, and the ensuing crucifixion. I love what Jesus told Pilate in [John 19:10-11](#) as Pilate was examining Him,

Jn 19:10 Then Pilate said to Him, "Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?" ¹¹ Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."

Pilate thought that he was actually in control and had power to do whatever he wanted to do, but nothing, absolutely nothing could have been any further from the truth. What was happening to Christ was completely under His control. This was the Lamb “**slain before the foundation of the world**”. This was why He even came to the earth that He had made. Everything in eternity and everything in the mind and heart of God had targeted this very moment as the most important event that could ever take place. This was the most critical moment relative to salvation, forgiveness, and eternal life that would ever happen – and everyone can be fully assured that nothing in heaven or on earth could have stopped these events from transpiring. Listen carefully to how God communicated this in [Isaiah 53:10](#) when He said “**Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief.**” This was no unfortunate historical accident – never! This was the perfect work of God unfolding, developing, and advancing just as He had planned. This was the perfect event at the perfect time and the perfect place happening to the most perfect being in all of eternity. This was no uncontrolled, purposeless, and evolving accident. Trust me, but Jesus was no martyr unfortunately killed by ruthless men. This was both voluntary and planned. This was the most amazing work of God that men had ever seen, and men had absolutely no idea of what was taking place. To them, this was just another day and another criminal and another crucifixion.

What Jesus did when He died on the cross was lay down his life voluntarily as an expression of His deep love for those that would be saved. The actual use of this particular verb for laying down one’s life is only used by John and it is a phrase that refers to someone doing something that would be considered completely selfless and self-sacrificing.² Maybe the most important two words in [1 John 3:16](#) that would provide the greatest insight into what was actually taking place are the two words “**for us**”. The little preposition “**for**” means “in the place of” or “instead of”. The theological term for what the preposition “**for**” refers to is the term “vicarious”. It simply means that the death of Christ was on behalf of others or that it was substitutionary. Whenever someone is a substitute for another person, they go into the game for that person. In other words Number 10 goes in the game for Number 16 and takes his place in the game. That is how God wants the believer to understand this passage. Jesus literally took

the believer's place. The believer perceives that this is how the love of God has been demonstrated and performed – Christ laid down his life for the believer in place of, instead of, and as their substitute. Whatever penalty and punishment that our sins deserved, Christ was made sin and then our sins were punished in Him. He took our place by dying for us as our substitute.³ This is how we know what love actually is. It certainly is not all this nonsense that you may see on a soap opera – never.

Now, once John has established what Christ has done for the believer, then he proceeds to identify how the believer is to actually live. John says that believers should do the same thing that Christ did in a practical way. It is important to appreciate that a believer cannot do something in an atoning way as Christ did. Even if a believer was to personally lose their life for someone else, that believer's life could never be substituted in an atoning way and unforgiving way for someone else. Obviously, the greatest love that someone could demonstrate for someone else is that they would give their life for that person. Jesus said it this way in [John 15:13](#),

Jn 15:13 Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

That is the ultimate sacrifice. However, John realizes that that scenario is not the norm for the average Christian. It may play itself out in a war setting or at a time when an individual was trying to save the life of someone who was in danger and in the process they lose their own life. I am reminded of the firefighters who lost their life in the twin towers of 9/11 as they were trying to evacuate people from the buildings. It was a great sacrifice. John, however, intends for this to be more practical and so in v17 he provides a practical example of how love should be demonstrated to other believers. John simply says that if we see someone who has a legitimate need and we have the ability to help that individual, but we shut our heart from helping them, then he asked the question as to how the love of God could actually abide in us.

Now, at this point the most critical issue that has to be addressed is the definition of the word “**need**”. Some needs are critical and other needs are preferential and perceived. Obviously, John is not talking about the latter. The Greek noun for “**need**” is “*chreia*” and it refers to a real life necessity.⁴ I think that we could accurately say that it is a critical need in a person's life. It is when someone lacks the basic necessities needed to actually live. The kind of need that is addressed here is the kind that was mentioned in the early church. [Acts 2:45](#) and [Acts 4:35](#) say the following,

Ac 2:45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

Ac 4:35 and laid *them* at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.

There was great need in the early church because of the severe persecution that was taking place. In the Jewish culture when somebody came to Christ, they were de-synagogued which meant that not only could they no longer go to the synagogue, but they lost their jobs if they worked for someone who was not a Christian. So as Christianity began to grow, the needs became much greater.

At the beginning of this section in [1 John 3](#), the issue is not one of money, but one of love and compassion. Obviously, when John says that someone actually “**has this world's goods**”, he is identifying that the individual has the resources to do what needs to be done. So in this case, John clearly says that the individuals that he is addressing have the resources to meet the various needs before them. So the issue is not money or not having enough money. For John, the issue is love. For John, the issue

is compassion. Some of the most generous people that I have ever personally met actually had very little, but they were more than willing to share what they had with those who had legitimate needs. If you make more than \$25,000 per year, then you are wealthier than 95% of all of the people in the world. For most people in America, the issue is never one of money, but one of personal priorities as to what we may want to do with the money and resources that we have. I would say from just observation that the idea of sacrificial giving is almost non-existent in the American church. Even if the average Christian was to give over and above what they would normally give, it rarely is what could be considered a life-threatening sacrifice. It would be more of an adjustment for a period of time rather than an actual sacrifice.

From a very practical perspective, it seems that God will often test our willingness to help meet other people's legitimate needs. Please appreciate that this is not an appeal for you to give more money to the church. Just from a personal assessment, I would say that the average American church is both selfish and self-indulging simply because it is so absorbed with itself – all of its buildings and programs. The modern church has simply misdefined spiritual success. In fact, the curse of the end time's church or the Laodicean church is defined in [Revelation 3:17](#) when it says the following,

Rev 3:17 Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'--and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked--

The word “**need**” is further defined by the word “**goods**” in the first part of the verse. It simply refers to the necessities of life such as food, adequate clothing, and proper shelter.⁵ It is a word that refers to someone who has whatever they need as a livelihood for living.⁶

Then, the actual verb for “**has**” is in the present tense which simply means that the individuals who have this livelihood also have the goods they need habitually. It is the idea that they always have enough to meet their personal and family needs. So, the point is that John is not just talking to rich people who have a lot of money, but he is talking to people who adequately have what they need. Then to make the issue even stronger, the verb for “**sees**” is “*theoreo*” which means to deliberately contemplate and analyze something over an extended period of time. The idea is that the believer sees another believer who goes without the basic necessities of life over a long period of time.⁷ It is actually a word that means that a person has discernment that they have gained from seeing the reality of someone else's condition. It is used of someone who has been an actual spectator and observer of something.⁸ In other words, John is saying that a believer has the privilege of identifying the actual reality of a need that someone appears to have rather than just meeting that need immediately. Obviously, some needs are immediate such as someone whose home may burn down. They may have nothing left – no food, no shelter, and no clothing, and so it would not take a lot of contemplation to determine that we would need to help those believers.

Probably the most important word in this verse to properly define is the word “**shuts up**”. The NIV uses the phrase “**has no pity**”, and the AMP, NASB, and ESV use the word “**closes**”. The actual Greek word “**shuts up**” is “*kleio*” and one of the pictures of how this word was used was that of slamming a door shut, or of quickly snapping a lock.⁹ Now this is a very vivid picture of what John is addressing. Just because someone has a legitimate need does not always mean that we can meet that need. There was so much need in the early church that people simply gave to the church and the church distributed to those

needs as was necessary. In fact, in [Acts 6](#) the apostles had to select seven additional men to help them deal with providing food for the widows who had no resources for sustenance. The picture here, however, is addressing the believer who sees someone with a very legitimate need and they simply shut the door of their heart in even considering to help meet that need. It is the idea that this individual would never be willing to meet someone else's needs. As soon as they hear about it, they simply turn a deaf ear and act as if the need never existed. It is a very convenient way of being very selfish, self-centered, self-indulging, and certainly un-Christlike in their behavior.

It is important not to lose sight of what John is actually communicating here. John is not asking people to die for other people – something which sounds very noble and virtuous, but generally never comes into play in normal life. Rather, what John is addressing is the simple fact that often times people just need some help and genuine believers are normally inclined to actually help. We have said this often, but the verb “**love**” is an action verb. So, John is very direct in his conclusion at the end of v17 when he says that if this characteristic of just quickly shutting our heart to obvious needs because we are so self absorbed in what we may want, then in reality John says “**how does the love of God abide**” in us. That is actually a very rhetorical question and the answer is obvious – the love of God does not abide in that person, and their normal response to never help those in need is evidence that that individual is not saved.

So please do not miss the point. This is not a passage on money. This is not a passage condemning the rich or the wealthy. This is a passage on love and demonstrating both compassion and care for other believers who have legitimate needs. As individuals and as a church we cannot save the world, feed the world, and meet every need that people have. However, when God brings people into our life and circumstances into our life that have legitimate needs that we can meet, then when we do so it is evidence of the fact that we are actually saved. Sometimes we are very quick to say that we love everybody, but in essence that may simply be another way of saying that we do not love anyone in particular. I want to close out by reading Jesus' response to a Pharisee who wanted to justify himself in [Luke 10:29-37](#).

Lk 10:29 But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 Then Jesus answered and said: "A certain *man* went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded *him*, and departed, leaving *him* half dead. 31 Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side. 33 But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. 34 So he went to *him* and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave *them* to the innkeeper, and said to him, "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you." 36 So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" 37 And he said, "He who showed mercy on him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Akin, 158.
² MacArthur, 136.
³ Vines, 137-138.
⁴ Vine, 777.
⁵ Wuest, 154.
⁶ Vine, 496.
⁷ Wuest, 154.
⁸ Strong, 1139.
⁹ Wuest, 154.

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