

The Character of Mercy James Shepherd

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[0 : 00] I'm sure you've heard the phrase, you talk the talk, but do you walk the walk? We use this phrase with people when we think they're making a very bold claim about something they actually can't back up.

So if I said to you, I could do 500 push-ups without breaking, without a sweat, would you believe me or would you think that I was all talk?

Now, I know I have the appearance that I could, the physique, but let me tell you, it's all appearance. It's not a true reflection.

If you told me to get down and do 500 push-ups, I would fail, and you'd find out really, really quickly that I was just simply all talk. We consider those who are all talk and no action as people who don't have much integrity.

They don't have the words to back up. We see this quite commonly in the way we say to each other, we say to those people, we come in contact with our friends that we see from time to time, we should catch up for a coffee soon.

[1 : 11] You ever say to someone, I've said this to plenty of people. We say to them, we should catch up for a coffee soon, but it never seems to happen. We never seem to make the effort of actually organizing the time to catch up and have coffee with these people.

And we've come to the point now where the words leave our mouth, and we know, we know we're not going to hang out with these people. We know we're not going to actually catch up with them. But we just say it just because it feels rude not to say it.

We say it because we think it's a nice thing to do. We talk the talk, but do we walk the walk? That is the question on John's mind here in this letter as he writes to his brothers and sisters.

His question is whether or not we Christians are living out our lives, our calling to love each other. And perhaps he makes the accusation that while we might be good at talking the talk, while we might be good at talking about love, we're not really good at actually loving.

We're not really good in walking in the way of love. As Christians, we love to talk about love. We'll always talk about how much God loves you, how much God loves us.

[2 : 16] We talk about it on Facebook, sharing the Bible verses of that. Talk about God's love. From the platform, you might always hear people saying that God just loves you, he wants to wrap you up in his love, he wants to make you warm and dizzy in his love.

He wants the best for you. He loves you so much. Christians are good at talking about love. But do we walk in the way of love? We're constantly saying that we are going to be Jesus' hands and feet, that we want to do things and to show our love practically.

But how much does that actually eventuate? John's fear is that although we might retain the word love, we've forgotten altogether what is at the core of our faith, to love practically.

Verse 11, For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, we should love one another. His fear is that they have forgotten that the heart of the Christian life is love, and love not simply done in speech, but action, modelled by Christ, which we see in verse 18.

I'm sorry, verse 15. 16 even. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us, that we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. And so he concludes next section, verse 18.

[3 : 33] Dear children, let us not love with words or speech, but with action, and in truth. I wonder if John would fear the same for us today, if you looked at our church.

Would he see us as a church who talks to talk and walks the walk, or just as a church that just talks about love, and doesn't walk in the way of love? Have we forgotten in the midst of all our Christian talk, to actually walk in the way of love?

We're in a series called Love Thy Neighbor, in which we want to spend time reflecting on our cause of church to love each other, and to love those in the world around us, in real, practical ways. Meeting the felt needs of people, those around us. The poor, the hungry, the marginalized, the sick, the needy, the vulnerable. Showing them the powerful and wonderful, restorative power of the gospel.

How the kingdom of God has come in, ushered in through Jesus, and how through him, we can enjoy healing and new life now in this life. We saw last week, we are called to the task of practical love, in meeting the needs of those who are vulnerable.

[4 : 44] This week, we're going to explore the fundamental characteristic of our calling, that enables us, and fuels us, for this task. Love.

Using this passage here, in John's letter to these brothers and sisters, we're going to unpack the character of Christian love, by looking at what the experience, and the existence of Christian love reveals, and what the essence of Christian love is.

So I'm going to be asking those two questions, about Christian love this morning. And perhaps we ought to reflect, if John's fear, ought to be our fear as well.

Whether we are walking in the way of love, or just simply talking about it. So firstly, the existence, and experience of Christian love, reveals new life, and is itself, driven towards life.

John begins by stating the message, you heard from the beginning, to love one another. And then he straight away contrasted, the call to love each other, with the example of Cain, who murdered his brother, back in Genesis.

[5 : 54] Safe to say, he didn't love his brother, but hated him. If you remember the story, back in Genesis, the two brothers brought gifts to God, Abel's gift was accepted, but Cain's gift was rejected by God.

And the cause of Cain's murder, the reason why he murdered his brother Abel, wasn't because Abel had outdone him, in a sense, it was because Cain was jealous, of Abel, and resented him. His feelings and actions towards Abel, were evil. Jealousy, resentment, and bitterness, all brewed into hatred, and eventually led, to him killing his brother, in an act of revenge, and hatred.

Now, why the reminder of such a story as this? Pretty brutal and awful story. Verse 13, Don't be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.

John is making a point that the world is not a place where love is found naturally. We don't need to venture very far to know this is all too true. Since almost the beginning of time, as John points out, hatred has been the dominating characteristic of our world.

[7 : 11] And hate has an inclination, or propensity, towards death. As we see in the story of Cain, the story of Cain has been played out again, and again, and again in our world.

Jealousy, and bitterness, leads to hate, and hate leads to murder. Death. And although it doesn't always end in murder, we see deaths of different kinds in our world.

Deaths of relationship, deaths of friendships, marriages, and family breakdowns. All result from this pattern of life we see exemplifying Cain, of jealousy, bitterness, and hatred.

And so the result being a total disregard for life, life for each other, and life in general. Where we can end up saying to different people in our life, you are dead to me.

But, verse 14, we know that we have passed from death to life because we love each other. The difference for the Christian is that he no longer lives according to the pattern of Cain, which is to be under the influence of sin and death.

[8 : 26] Instead, Christians, by the power of the gospel, have been made alive again. They have passed from death to life. And the foundational evidence of this new life is what? Love.

Love. The profound difference between the world and the Christian is one that has an inclination towards hate and therefore death, whilst the other has an inclination towards love and therefore life. Christian love reveals and is evidence of new life given to us by Christ. Because love is driven as a propensity for life.

To explain what I mean, think about those people in your life, your friends or family, co-workers, who contribute to your life in such ways that gives you joy because of their love for you.

They're the kinds of people who are always there for you when things aren't good because they love you. When you say let's catch up for coffee, they will organise it because they want to be with you.

[9 : 34] When we're down an ounce, miserable, depressed and hurt, it can be the words of a friend that revitalise our soul. When we are sick and unwell, it can be the service of a friend making us meals, doing the dishes, doing the groceries that can make us or make our bodies feel strong again, make our hearts glad.

It can be the phone call, the visit, the offer to help, the active encouragement in walking alongside us in grief that can regenerate us and give us life once more.

This is what I mean when I say love has a propensity towards life. Love allows for the enabling, the flourishing, sustaining of life in relationship that human beings so desperately want.

Indeed, that's its purpose, to give and to allow for life to happen. Hate, as characterised by Cain, does the opposite and has propensity and an inclination towards death.

Whether it's murder or toxic relationships where love is talked about but never acted upon, the hatred we see in our world reveals that it's under the influence on reign of sin and death, one which is unescapable.

[10 : 53] but the great hope for our world is that life has broken in and it overpowered the reign of death that has been since Cain.

And since, as Christians, we love each other, we're able to love those in our world who need it. For Cain's hatred of Abel led him to take life and that has been the pattern of the world since.

God, who is rich in love, sent his one and only Son into the world of death that whoever may believe in him may not perish, may not face death, but what?

Have eternal life. There is more at stake here than just simply talking to talk and walking the walk, isn't there?

The existence and experience of Christian love isn't simply a matter of Christian integrity. It's a matter of life and death. Verse 14 again, we know that we have passed from death to life because we love each other.

[12 : 00] Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.

Christian love proves you have been made alive again, that you have crossed over from death to life. It's the result and overflowing of faith in Christ. Hate isn't.

Hate is a dangerous emotion for a Christian to have, especially for his own brother or sister. It's contradictory to the gospel, to the work of God that has happened in us.

It belongs in the realm of sin and death in the world as exemplified by Cain himself. If you have hate in your heart, you may need to reflect upon whether you are following in the pattern of Cain or even in the pattern of Christ.

perhaps you need to reflect and pray and discuss with the person who is the object of your hate or your resentment and seek reconciliation and forgiveness.

[13 : 10] It's not something we should be afraid of doing though. For the ministry of reconciliation is one that's fueled by love and ushering in life. Indeed, reconciliation of relationships is where we begin to see the impact of the gospel in our life, where we see life beginning to come in and bring us back together.

For hate leads to death, but love showing in reconciliation and forgiveness leads to life. The existence of love and experience is the evidence of new life in Christ because love in its foundational working has a propensity and inclination towards life.

Love is all about ushering in, sustaining and allowing life to flourish, whereas hate leads towards taking life away. And this leads to my second point.

Seeing that existence and experience of love is new life. The essence of love is seen in sacrificial life-giving actions that transcend worldly comprehension.

That should be on the screen. It's a big, big sentence. Just to recap, the basic point I wanted to make was love is for life. Just as a hat is for the head, a chair is for sitting, Jimmy is for Katie and McDonald's, love is for life.

[14 : 51] Love's proper goal and purpose is to enable and usher in life. Now I want to articulate the essence of this love that is to show what it looks like in the real world.

And as I've said, I think its essence is sacrificial life-giving action which ultimately transcends worldly comprehension. Verse 16, 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. John 7 verse 11, what is fundamental to the gospel, namely love.

And here in verse 16 he now says how we know what love is. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. Just take that in.

That is love. The example set before us is Jesus Christ himself who loved us by giving up his own life.

[15 : 53] Jesus' sacrifice ushered in new life for us. He was driven by love and he gave up his own life that we might pass from death to life ourselves and enjoy eternal life with him.

His sacrifice was a life-giving action. This is what life is. And according to John, this is love, the love that we ourselves should walk in and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

Have a look at each other in this room. Would you be willing to die for the person sitting next to you or behind you? And some of you might be thinking, define what it is to lay down your life.

Tell me what it is. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? That question. Such a call, such a question makes us want to ask that question like the expert in the law in Luke 10 who asked Jesus, who is my neighbour?

But let us not cheapen love. Let us not lower the bar. Sacrificial, life-giving action is the bar that Christian love sets.

[17 : 13] It's the pattern we are to follow in. This gives or ought to give more weight to our words when we say I love you. When we say I love you, what we're saying is I am willing to sacrifice my life for you that you might have life to give up the most precious possession that we have, life, so that others might keep it and enjoy it and flourish in it.

It implies so much more than just simple talk from the front here in church that we might often hear how much we just love you and we want to be part of everything and God loves you so much once you feel so warm and dizzy.

No, it's so much more than that. It's a love that's willing to get down the dirt sacrificially to the point of which you're willing to give up your own life. We are so transformed by the gospel that it gives us new life that we love in such a way that we're willing to give it up again for the sake of preserving another's life in order that they might experience the kingdom of God which is life that is invaded into our present age through Jesus Christ.

it shows our world who cannot comprehend such love that we are under the reign and the rule of someone far greater than the world for whilst they might fear death existing in the world that has propensity towards it we are those who do not fear death willing to embrace it because we belong to the kingdom of heaven which is eternal life and we're willing to lay down our lives that others might see that and know that that we've come under the lordship of Jesus who is eternal life we lay it down knowing full well that we'll be brought back up again when God's kingdom of eternal life is established in its fullness forever that's the call it's a big call that's the love we should have for each other and whilst not all of us here will have the opportunity to give up our life for each other we're nonetheless called to love with such an attitude to love wanting to love in a way that's sacrificially giving but also gives life as well verse 17 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 the willingness to lay down one's life is the bar that Christian love sets but it's also the attitude and the character of Christian love in general when one begins to follow in the pattern of Christ a transformation takes place they see life and love differently instead of seeing our possessions as ours to indulge in or our times ours to use to see fit or our money as ours to spend on whatever we want the love of God in Christ Jesus changes that for us it changed the disposition in us to see life as all about sacrificial life giving material possessions that aren't as something for us to indulge in but something for us to give up that others might have and enjoy life and so when John says if anyone has material possessions and says a brother or sister are in need but has no pity on them he's saying that that's a contradiction that exists between what you confess and how you act you talk the talk but do you walk the walk you do as the priest and the

[21 : 06] Levite do in Luke 10 and walk on by those two people who exemplify what it is to know God apparently who are supposed to look after God's people who are supposed to show compassion and mercy these people who we expected to help they walk on by is that us he concludes about such people how can the love of God be in them when we don't have pity on those who are in need around us we show a complete disregard for life and instead we serve them up death by our ignorance by ignoring them this is no doubt challenging I feel the weight of what I'm saying right now and it's not easy to do this there are many difficulties today when it comes to helping the poor and the sick the vulnerable the need the homeless it's not black and white but

where we have the means to help we must because as

Christians we have been given new life and the pattern of love to follow in which means we have such a great privilege to love people through sacrificial life giving actions and by giving life and healing to those under the reign of death we bring them into the experience of God's kingdom which is eternal life don't we want this for those who don't know Jesus don't we want to bring them out of the kingdom of darkness or the kingdom of death so that they can enjoy knowing God and being in relationship with him and also enjoy the benefits of being in his kingdom where his people love in a sacrificial way when they're hungry his people feed them when they're naked his people clothe them when they're in financial trouble God's people get money together and support them all these things are experiences of new life kingdom life which God has ushered in beginning with Jesus and we see the awful effect of sin and death on people around us in our world are we not moved like the Samaritan who saw the man lying half dead and robbed do we not take pity throughout all of Jesus' ministry in his life he brought life to those he encountered we see that Jesus healed the sick he made the blind see he rose the literal dead from the grave the lame walk his love in action brought life showing that his kingdom was coming in and breaking into the world of sin and death which is being pushed out by the kingdom of God which is eternal life Jesus ultimately loved us sacrificially by giving up his own life that we might be able to partake in this kingdom kingdom of life and invite others to do so and to experience the same thing as we encounter the poor and help them as we feed those who are hungry as we take in those who are outcasted and marginalised we give them an experience of the kingdom of God it's not going to be perfect of course we're still looking forward to that perfect day when things will be made right and new but as we take these people in as we show the love of

God to them by feeding them not just by talking to them by giving them clothes and money by helping them restoring their life we give them a glimpse a shadow of what is to come for them in Jesus when he returns as we encounter these people we have a wonderful privilege to give them life as we love them by meeting their needs as we take pity and use what God has given us to help meet their needs but it starts with our attitude of love our desire to love sacrificially performing life giving actions to a world who needs it so will we walk in the way of love not just talk about it let me leave you with John's words in verse 18 dear children let us not love with words or speech but with actions and truth and truth men as