

Truth and Action

by

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Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

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.

I'd like to begin with a story about a friend's childhood church. My friend told me that in their church, the word "BIBLE" was a popular acronym. B-I-B-L-E: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth. Within its 66 books, the Bible, it was said, laid out clearly all we needed to know to get from here to heaven. Read the Bible, do what it said, inherit eternal life. It was as clear as that. Basic Instructions.

One of the gifts of being a pastor is you learn how to listen. You're trained to hear the words behind the words. When I first heard about B-I-B-L-E, I couldn't help but hear the concerned questions underneath. Questions like, "What do I need to do to inherit eternal life?" "Is there any way to be assured of my faith?"

You see, anyone who has read the Bible faithfully, as those in my friend's childhood church have, know it is often complex and at times confusing. Rather than basic, the Bible can be baffling and bewildering. To reduce the Bible to "basic instructions" is to say, "I need some help knowing how to follow God faithfully." Such a need is as old as the Bible itself. All Christians need assurance at critical points in their lives. That's why we have texts like today's passage from 1 John.

It opens with words of assurance. "We know," the writer begins, "We know love by this, that he [Jesus] laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." The author anticipates our follow-up question, "but how?" and adds, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." We know love by living it out in truth and action.

The consistent test of genuine Christianity throughout this passage and letter is whether our actions will match our professions, whether our feet and our tongue are in alignment. How can we be assured of our faith in Christ? We can be people who believe in Jesus, who do what we say, who live out what we believe, following Christ's example.

Sometimes this means humbling ourselves. We may need to become less prideful in order to care for those in need, lowering ourselves to assist those without food, clothing, stable housing, and the like. At other times, though, we need to be raised up! Pastor William Self writes, “Proud hearts occasionally need humbling, but much more often humble hearts need lifting... We need the encouragement of faith so despair does not take root.”¹ We need our faith to raise us up to act, and to know it will matter.

Friends, I know it is easy to despair, to believe our actions will not matter. We give money to support the local food pantry, but the line seems to get longer each week. We donate to international causes, addressing human trafficking in the Philippines, or education in Haiti, but our small action does not prevent the next devastating headline. We march, protest, and cry out for justice, only to see another video, another name turned hashtag, another innocent death.

It may seem easier and even preferable to stay out of it all, to neither humble ourselves to others, nor be raised up to action on their behalf. Calm, security, and personal abundance are nicer. They keep insulated from the highs and lows of life, which we don’t particularly care for anyway, especially when we can’t seem to fix them.

Despair is why it can be hard to hear the freeing invitation of Psalm 23. We’re told that God is our shepherd, we shall not want, that God will make us lie down in green pastures, lead us by still waters, and restore our soul, that even in the darkest valley we will be comforted by God’s presence. In this scenario, God is the one addressing the ups and downs – we’re following God’s lead. But why is this so hard? We must admit that we rarely follow the psalmist’s instructions. Perhaps like me, you struggle to let God lead you to the green pastures; instead you think you can, or even that you have to, do it alone. The still waters sound

William L. Self, “1 John 3:16-24: Homiletical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Year B*, Vol. 2, 445.

nice, but who has the time for such a stroll? Even as we hear the familiar words, we think, “no time, God; I have a better plan.”

We believe instead, that we can save ourselves, that we know best; and it wears us thin. It is exhausting to try to save yourself, much less someone else. We may groan when we hear sentences like the one from 1 John, “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 to help?” We want to respond, “God, I’ve tried to care for that person, but it didn’t work. I offered help and it was ignored; I volunteered my time and nothing changed; I made a sign and went to a march and there was no improvement.” You’ve tried and now you’re tired so you drift back into the familiar rhythms of stable, calm life. In the end, no one has been saved, not even yourself. This is what happens when we try to be the savior. We have good intentions, but we’re not built for it. In despair we retreat to saying all the right words, but no longer believing change through action is possible.

But friends, I’m here to remind you that the good news is that we have a savior and it’s not us! What’s more, our savior wants us to be like him, but not to be him, and there is a big difference. We can let Jesus be the savior, freeing us up to be who we were created to be.

The place to start is where you are right now. What gifts do you have that God can use? Who are the particular people or needs or causes where your passions and the world’s pain line up? Our scripture text is hard on Christians who say they have the love of Jesus in their hearts but do not share their materials goods with those in need. It’s hard to even imagine what the writer would say to us today in a world in which an estimated 726 million people live on less than two dollars a day.² This statistic can overwhelm us, if we think we need to help all of them. I believe that is why the author does not speak broadly of those who are

² The World Bank estimates that in 2020 9.2% of the world’s population (estimated at 7.9 billion people) live on \$1.90 or less per day. See “Monitoring Global Poverty,” in *Reversals of Fortune: Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020* (The World Bank: Washington D.C., 2020), 27.

poor, but speaks of a brother or a sister, the one in need who is before us at that moment. If we close our heart to that sister or brother, we close our heart to God. When we open our heart to that sister or brother, when we share our gifts, we can be assured that God abides in us, and that it is the savior at work through us.

Paying attention to those in front of us, and God believing God is with us as we do, is how we survive the highs and lows of life. God is with us through the darkest valley, and is the hope that rises from yet another mass shooting. Believing God is with us is how a nurse or doctor makes it through another day of caring for those sick with COVID, and how a widow prepares a meal for one. It is even how many individuals survive attacks against them because of the color of their skin, or who they love, or the dreams they have for their children.

God is with us, right here, and it makes a difference. Loving in truth and action requires commitment, faith, and focus. It means being present to those in front of you, caring for a neighbor, stranger, family member, and even yourself. When we focus on those before us, we acknowledge our own gifts and limitations, and trust Jesus to be the savior. We admit that we do not know the way to salvation, but will follow where he leads us.

Thinking back to my friend's church's bulletin board, maybe they were on to something I didn't notice at first. Perhaps the Bible's instructions can be reduced to a few basic bits: believe in Jesus, love like he did. I would add though, that living this out, and loving like Jesus did will be complex and confusing; at times even baffling and bewildering. There will be highs and lows, and it will require all of you. And yet, I know of no more meaningful way to live. How can we be assured of our faith? We can believe in God, and we can love like God did. We know we cannot save the world, we weren't created to do that. But we can trust God is with us and love as Christ did, using the gifts God gave us to care for those in front of us, and knowing it makes a difference. Each of you has been called to use your gifts in service to God and neighbor, and

to lead this church to do likewise. May we all be raised up, so that we may love, not just in word or speech, but in truth and action. Amen.