

Living the Love of Jesus

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Well if you've been with us the past couple of weeks you know that we have been making our way through sections of the Letter of first John, a book in the New Testament. This is the tip- it's been the Epistle reading for this season of the year in the Lectionary, which we've been using to guide our path through Scripture. And we are celebrating the season of Easter remember we're talking about Eastertide, that's the fancy, churchy word for it but Easter as a season practicing resurrection as a way of life. A whole season of resurrection not just one special holy day although we did have that and it was a beautiful day. And this letter of John that we've been in for the past few weeks is really a very beautiful text— it's like a deep river flowing with spiritual truth alternating between heartwarming reassurances and heart rending exhortations. And if you've been traveling with us through this book you've probably felt really warm and wonderful at times reading these words and hearing these words read and then other times you've been like: “whoa that was kind of cold” and that is when Scripture is at its best, when it's doing both of those things in our hearts and in our lives. And it continues with that somewhat today, I want to continue today with 1 John 3:16-24. This is once again the epistle reading assigned to us by the Lectionary— by the way I haven't said this in a while but if you don't know what the Lectionary is or how to find the texts of it Google is your friend, you can just do a search for Lectionary the first result will be a website that publishes the Lectionary texts for the week at all the time and I very strongly encourage you if you want to be more engaged with how we work with scripture on Sundays to be reading these texts leading up to Sunday and sometimes they fit together really neatly, today it's kind one of those days, and other times you just kind of “I'm not sure why these are together” but it's we're reading the Bible and that's good so.

I want to use this text today first John three, sixteen to twenty four, which I think is on, what? page 990 if you'd like to look at it in a read by way you can. Just double check my page number there I have it in my notes but the pages where it exists in this Bible are stuck together. Oh boy going to Seminar to learn how to work with the Bible and this is not what I had in mind. There it is OK Yes page-page 990-991 if you want to get in and read Bibles I will be reading it parsed

portions of it aloud so you can just be a listener if you prefer that but I want to use this as a basis of a reflection for who Jesus is for us today. Who or what is Jesus for us? Many things of course and we could look at lots of different passages of scripture and see who Jesus is for us and what Jesus is for us. But there are three today that I want to identify from this particular passage of Scripture and they will move us from a very basic concept of Christianity as obedience to a much more complicated concept of Christianity as a contemplative way of life. And both of those things are important but one of them is a lot more difficult to understand and implement than the other. So we have taken sections and will think together about three things that define who Jesus is for us. So let's dive right in, we start with verse sixteen 1 John 3: 16 says this: "We know the love by this: That he lay down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for one another". In many ways this one verse of scripture could contain the entirety of our faith we applied it to every area of life I think we would get most of the way there. But here it is right in the beginning the first thing that Jesus has for us is what? An example. Jesus is our example of what God's love is for us— the way that we know what love is says, we know love by this he laid down his life for us. And He is our example of what love that we have should be for other people, for all people. Jesus became our example first here in his teaching. Jesus is the one after all who said "greater love has no one than this to lay down one's life for one's friends" and he became our example in his life. The exemplification of that teaching is when he went to his own death like a lamb led to slaughter making no sound, no gesture of protest, committing no act of retributive violence he was our example of the teaching that he gave us. So thanks to having Jesus as an example I think the calling on our lives as Christian people is actually quite clear there's not really a lot of debate about it, you don't have to have a seminary degree to understand what's being said here— we are to lay down our lives for one another because that's what Jesus said to do and that's what Jesus did. In that example, the calling is clear.

But as is so often the case with things that are clear, it's not necessarily easy, is it? Because listen to what John says right after that, we could have stopped with one verse week I could have preached on 1 John 3:16 and we would have had a lot to say about that and a lot to learn from about what comes next is this how it goes: "God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help. Little children, let us love not in words or speech but in truth in action". Why couldn't he have just left it with that very clear but very theoretical statement from verse sixteen? No he has to get all specific as to get up all up in our business. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's good goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Now if you're like me you'd have to use both hands, all ten fingers to count the number of times you failed to obey that commandment just in the past week. How many people did you and I see in the past seven days

who were in need and we did nothing have you-have you gotten on or off for 490 this week? How many of us talk a good game about caring for the poor and but we do nothing? How many of us think that that voting for the right person or criticising the right person who's been elected for their policies regarding caring for the poor is all that we need to do to engage with public policy in the world? That by the way counts as words not as deeds or action. Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in truth and action. I love how John writes this stuff is so gentle— little children, you are messing up so bad. Loving not in word or speech but in truth and action that's where the rubber meets the road and that is what takes us from clarity to difficulty, that's what makes it yes it's still clear but is not easy. And I think we often succumb to the despair that can come from knowing we have failed so often, so consistently, so spectacularly to obey this clear command from Jesus. It is so easy for us to say “oh, I'm so awful. I can't I can't even go one week obeying this commandment”.

We don't encourage you don't slip beneath the waves of that despair just yet because we haven't gotten to the second thing that Jesus is for us, the first thing that Jesus is for us or it is our example both in his teaching and in his life and death but what else is Jesus? Let's move on verse nineteen: “And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us for God is greater than our hearts and He knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us we have boldness before God”. Here's the second thing that I see Jesus being for me and for you in this passage and that is our defender and Jesus is our defender specifically our defender against condemnation. I love the stories in the Gospels where Jesus is the defender of somebody who's being condemned by religious zealots, those are my favorite passages of Scripture. Most of us know the story of John 8, we might not know it as the story in John 8, but most of us know the story of the woman who was caught in the act of adultery and dragged before Jesus by the teachers of the law because the the teaching of the law was clear that those who are caught in adultery, that's a capital offense. And Jesus said “but he who is without sin be the first one to throw a stone at her”— let's execute the death sentence that she deserves and the one who gets to start the proceedings is the one who has no sin and they all remembered they had something else to do that day. One by one starting with the oldest and wisest they walked away. And the last person to do so was the real loud mouth one who post to Twitter all the time about how awful everything is in the world. And he walked away too. And then Jesus said the most one of most beautiful things in all of Scripture, he looked to the woman and said “Where are your accusers? Isn't anybody condemn you?” and she said “No one, sir” and he said to her “Then neither do I condemn you, get up and leave your life of sin behind”. Jesus is our defender against those forces and individuals who would accuse us. By the way did you know that the the Greek word for the devil, when you see the devil in the in the New Testament diabolos, and what that word

means in Greek is a slander or an accuser. So it seems like the the innate tendency of the powers of evil in the universe are oriented toward slander and accusation and when you hear that accusation coming at you it's telling you you're defined by the things you've done that is from the devil and that's where Jesus gets in between you and the accusation and is your defender. And that's not to say that we should never listen when people call us to do better in our obedience to Christ's commands— see that's the opposite problem. You know the pendulum swing tendency that effect right where the people are overemphasizing way over here on the side, we swing the pendulum and we want to find the middle and whoops now it's one over here, right? So yes there is a tendency in the church to say OK the religious experts the zealots they are they're accusing people way too much let's let's kind of rein that in and then whoops now we don't care whatever whatever you want to do is fine. That's not what I'm advocating for you. I mean we get this we get a kind of the prevention against the overswing of the pendulum right here in the passage we read it a minute ago how is it that God's love could abide in anybody who has the world's goods and sees a brother and sister need and yet refuses help? I think that's a pretty good and fair analysis of the way that we live our lives. That's a pretty clear call to do different and do better. And after all the woman was guilty of the sin she was accused of and Jesus did tell her to leave that behind when she got up off the ground that day. But here's the problem when people start talking like our sins give us our identity that's a problem— she is an adulterer, he is a thief, they are hypocrites. When you put that verb to be in there between your name and your sin and it starts to define who you are you know you know that's the work of the devil, that's what Jesus is here to defend us from, that's when we need Jesus to drive off all those accusers because it's not just an external condemnation that brings us to our knees and shame is it? Jesus is also our defender against the condemnation of our own hearts. That's actually what the passage says, took a long way around the barn to get there. He will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us, not when people out there condemn us, not even when the devil condemns us but when our hearts condemn us. Because if you've heard enough people outside condemning you you begin to believe them don't you? You begin to condemn yourself and that is never what Jesus wants for us. “Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us we have boldness before God”.

How is it that we could all hear the the call to obedience that was given earlier and all of us could say and murmur in agreement we have not even made it through the week without caring for people and laying down our lives the way Jesus taught us and told us. How is it that we could all agree that that we fail in that way and yet still be in a place where we could say we have boldness before God? And that's actually the third thing. That's where things get really complicated and confusing and difficult and it might take us the rest of our lives to master it and guess what? We might not ever get there. How many would like to sign up for a lifetime of

trying to figure something out with no guarantee you ever will? I feel like if that was the call at the at these evangelistic Crusades there be way fewer people at the altar. But I actually think that's what we're called to as people living out the Gospel in the world Jesus is our example Jews are Defender. There's one more thing that this passage points to Jesus being and I think it's the hardest to comprehend in the hardest to live out so I look at the last couple of verses in this passage and see what we find verse twenty four. Right after it says we have boldness before God It also says this "And we receive from him whatever we ask because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him 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. 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". Now this business of receiving from him whatever we ask. I find this really challenging, I find it really confusing. There are times in my life when I found it very troubling. It it's not the only place that appears it would be a little easier to ignore but Jesus himself talks about this in John's Gospel of John 57 Jesus says: "If you abide in me and my words abide in you ask for whatever you wish and it will be done for you". It's almost as if the person who is sitting there with him with Jesus when Jesus said that wrote this letter that we're reading today isn't that. This is challenging and confusing and maybe even troubling because I know that I am not alone in this every single one of you in this room has prayed to Jesus and ask for something and had the response been negative. Every single one of you has asked Jesus for something at one point your life and not gotten it. Am I wrong? Please raise your hand if you have never asked Jesus and for something and not gotten it. There's a lot of negatives in that sentence, sorry, but nobody raised their hand which was what I was going for. It was like a quadruple negative wasn't it? Sometimes you ask Jesus for something and you get the exact opposite you know? If that is ever happened to you in any significant way about anything that really mattered then you probably read verse twenty two with some amount of pain and that pain may drive you to cynicism or doubt or even to outright unbelief. Because how could you read those words "if you abide me ask for whatever you want to be given to you" and then ask him for something and not get it and not have an existential crisis there as a result.

Ultimately, I don't think that that verse means that we're supposed to expect Jesus to give us whatever we want like a genie who grants us wishes. It can't mean that because my own life has proven that to be false. But that is what it sounds like at first I think this is one of those verses in the Bible where it's helpful to remember a rule that one of my seminary professors gave me— Are you ready for a good seminary rule for interpret in the Bible? The Bible doesn't mean what it says it means what it means. Isn't that helpful? Yeah thanks. That's what I said. The Bible doesn't mean it says it means what it means, oh man. Because the the importance of

that rule is that you have to do some work with the text. And we don't want to do any work. We just wanted to mean what it says and have it be clear. We can make a bumper sticker out of it God said it, I believe it, that settles it. And I think the meaning here of this particular verse is much subtler much more complex much deeper. What I think it suggests is that the lines between believing in Jesus and obeying Jesus and trusting Jesus and following the example of Jesus and having the peace that Jesus provides in the face of condemnation and self-doubt, between the lines between all of those things, and even knowing the Holy Spirit, the line between all of those things become softer and softer and eventually become nonexistent as we come to know Jesus more as we live in Him and as He lives in us. This is the third thing that Jesus is for us today. If we can allow ourselves to believe it, Jesus is our resting place. And if we rest in Him, if we live with Him, if we allow Him to live in us, if we abide in Him as He abides in us our wills become so intertwined with His will that we receive what we ask for because all we want is what He wants and He wants all that we want. That song we sang earlier love that line every cell in me must respond to the rhythm of your heart. I feel like I don't know how many cells are in the human body— some of it some biologists in the room must know right? I don't know I feel like five cells in my body respond to the beating of Jesus heart and there's more than that I've got to reign in those other cells. I am so not there yet abiding in Jesus or Jesus truly being my resting place. I am fine with Jesus being my example, I've got it, I understand it. Obey Him, yes! I get it, I fail at it but I get it. I am so happy Jesus is my defender because there been lots of times in my life when when somebody else or even my own heart tried to condemn me for the many many many things I have done wrong but Jesus is my resting place I am really struggling with that one and I expect I might be for the rest of my life. Because through contemplative Christianity means you are living with Jesus, sitting with Jesus, abiding with Jesus and Him with you wherever you are, whatever's going on, whatever storm is raging around you, whatever temptations are afflicting you, whatever pain is in your body or your heart or your soul or your mind you are resting in Jesus and when you get to that state is when it really becomes true that you ask him for whatever you wish and you receive it because it's already what he wants.

So to the extent that there's ever a debate between works and faith, and boy has there been that debate in the life of the church, I think it misses the point that's why one of the letters in the New Testament can say we're saved by faith not by works and another letter in the New Testament can say show me your works or show me your faith without the works and I'll show you something that dead— That's a paraphrase but you get the point. To the extent that there's ever a debate between caring for the poor on one hand and prayer, it misses the point. And if you don't see that yet if you're if you're if you're unable to accept what I just said I think Jesus needs to draw you a little closer, you certainly need to draw me a little closer because I see that

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distinction about every every every other second my mind changes on that. To the extent that there's ever a debate between action and contemplation it misses the point— the point is that all of these things are opposite sides of the very same coin. This is his commandment that we should believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ with head and heart and love one another. Body, get moving because love is activated by action, love is defined by our activity. This is his commandment, what is his commandment? This is, that's a plural verb isn't it? This is not these are his commandments this is his one commandment that we should believe and love those are two things but they're the same. This is his commandment that we should believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another. They are the same. Jesus is our example, Jesus is our defender and if we will allow it to be true for us Jesus is our resting place.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus we are so thankful for this challenge from Scripture even though it is hard to understand even harder to apply. We pray by the power of the Holy Spirit, by the mercy that we receive that it would become true for us. Bless now these elements of bread and wine and juice that they would truly be the body and blood of the Savior. Sacrifice that saves us and the world from our sin. May it empower us strengthen us nourish our souls to do the work that you have called us to do— to believe in you and to love one another. We pray these things in your name. Amen.

Well as the band comes and leads us in another song or two we do have our Communion table open for all who are seeking to follow Jesus in this place. Artisan's open table is not fenced by membership in any church including our own if you would like to receive the Grace and Mercy on offer from Jesus Christ our Savior. Please come and receive it. Dip a piece of the bread in one of the cups and take it right here at the table. And a reminder that there be a member of the prayer team to be happy to pray with you at the back of the room and that your children are probably ready to have you go and collect them if they are at the in the classrooms on the other end of the building. Let's respond to the Spirit in the many ways the Spirit might be speaking to us and continue to worship God. Our table is open.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com