

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – April 22, 2018

[1st John 3:16-24](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentaries below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on 1st John 3:16-24

(From the *Homiletics* archive; “Christ Life: Not the Same Old Formula” – April 26, 2015)

In many ways 1 John 3:16-24 is a commentary on John 15:1-17. Moreover, the opening declaration of 1 John 3:16-24 not only frames, but also directs, readers to the heart of this passage: "We know love by this." With absolute confidence, the author asserts that love is known by means of Jesus' sacrificial death — he is the one who "laid down his life for us." For that reason, "we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (v. 16; cf. John 15:13). John then asks, "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?" (v. 17)

Although the preceding query could be viewed merely as hypothetical — that is, as a rhetorical device — in all likelihood the question arose because the author either knew or suspected that there were disciples in the Johannine community who were acting selfishly by refusing to share their possessions with those in need. Such conduct is not only deemed reprehensible because it is incompatible with Jesus' example, it also is contrary to the church's history and established practice. From the founding of the church on Pentecost to the generous saints in Macedonia and Achaia who sent gifts by Paul's hand to assist the poor in Jerusalem, Jesus' earliest disciples freely shared their possessions with those in need (cf. Acts 2:44; 4:32-35; Romans 15:25-29).

Yet despite the consistent witness of other Christians, John's next comment — a warning to be sure — confirms that some believers in his community are clinging to their material goods. Instead of adhering to the church's customary practice regarding possessions, at least some were turning away from it. Therefore, John gently reminds them, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (v. 18). Moreover, it is "by this we will know that we are from the truth" (v. 19a). His admonition is the same one they "have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another," and it is by their love for one another that the author reassures them that they "have passed from death to life" (vv. 11, 14; cf. John 15:12).

Their love for each other entails an additional blessing. Specifically, we "reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us" (vv. 19b-20a). This assertion suggests that when we honestly acknowledge our sin, our confidence before God inevitably wavers, and, during these times, doubt can increase and certainty decrease. Even so, this doesn't necessarily mean that a person is without faith. On the contrary, one can believe and doubt at the same time (e.g., Mark 9:24). Thankfully, the litmus test

isn't whether our faith is absolute, without any reservations. Rather than limit the examination to our faith, we are to scrutinize our *conduct* as well. In this case, the ultimate test of our faith is how we treat others, especially those who need help.

John is clear: Christians are to love one another and lay down their lives for each other through the sacrificial gifts offered to others. On this basis, we remain confident that God will not condemn us because "[He] is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" (v. 20b). Simply put, even though we are acutely aware of our imperfections (i.e., our sin; see 1:8-10), God looks at the totality of our lives, and we will be judged by our actions. He will consider whether we have loved our brothers and sisters, and used the world's goods to feed, clothe and shelter them; or, did we hate our brothers and sisters, reserving the world's goods for our own self-interests, and thus murder them as Cain did Abel, although admittedly at a more excruciatingly slower pace? As stated previously in 1 John, a disciple cannot claim to be "in the light while hating a brother or sister." Indeed, such a person is "in darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness" (2:9, 11).

What's more, on those occasions when "our hearts do not condemn us," God grants another privilege: "We have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him" (vv. 21-22; cf. John 15:7, 16). This benefit is not to be construed as *carte blanche* for personal gain. God will not grant the requests of those who seek the world's goods in order to satiate their own selfish desires. Instead, he honors the requests of those whose wills are aligned with his. Their requests are not directed toward themselves, but rather toward others, for their brothers and sisters whom they love. "[I]n such a person there is no cause for stumbling," therefore, God will honor all his or her requests (2:10, 15-17).

After asserting that God gives us "whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments," it's logical for readers to expect John to expand on this, but the shift to the singular in verse 23 is unexpected: "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." On one hand, the command to "believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ" undoubtedly echoes John 20:31 in which John declares that "these [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God." In addition, the command to "love one another" reiterates one central component of Jesus' final exhortations to his disciples on the night he was betrayed (cf. John 13:34; 15:12, 17). On the other hand, how does one command someone to believe? Is it right or even possible to compel another person to believe? Beyond that, is there one principal commandment that has two elements — belief and love — or is the command to love derived in some way from belief?

Arguably, the vacillation between the singular and plural is ultimately moot for at least two reasons. First, since John reverts back to the plural in verse 24a — "All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them" — the discrepancy is probably not all that significant. Second, Jesus himself spoke of the command to "love one another" and, then, shortly thereafter, said, "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another" (John 15:12, 17). To put it differently, the commandments are summed up in the commandment to believe *and* love (cf. Mark 12:28-31). "And by this [i.e., whether defined as keeping the commandments or the commandment], we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us" (v. 24b; cf. John 15:10).

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?