

1 John 3:16-20

Actions speak louder than words! That's a familiar saying to most of us, it's one we have heard many times over the years. But, when you stop and think about it, it's true! We can talk until we're blue in the face, we can talk from now until doomsday, we can talk until the cows come home, but if our life doesn't match our words, we may as well forget it. What we do matters a lot more than what we say! That's the point John is making here in chapter 3 when he gives us a brilliant definition of love in verse 16, he says: 'This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.' You can't improve on that, you can't better that, this is the benchmark, it is the supreme example, it is the illustration par excellence. The finest exhibition of love is seen when we focus our gaze on Calvary and contemplate the Saviour's work of redemption on our behalf. He died for us, he died in place of us, he took on himself what we all deserve, he bore our punishment, he was willing to subject himself to the torrents of anger and wrath emanating from a holy God as he paid the penalty for our sin. He didn't have to do it, he didn't need to do it, he did it because he chose to do it, he did it because he wanted to do it. And, he did it for you, and thank God, he did it for me. That's love! The old hymn which impacted the Welsh revival in a past generation puts it like this: 'Here is love vast as the ocean, Loving kindness as the flood, When the Prince of life, our ransom, Shed for us His precious blood. Who his love will not remember? Who can cease to sing his praise? He can never be forgotten, Throughout heaven's eternal days. On the mount of crucifixion, Fountains opened deep and wide; Through the floodgates of God's mercy, Flowed a vast and gracious tide. Grace and love, like mighty rivers, Poured incessant from above, And heaven's peace and perfect justice, Kissed a guilty world in love.' When we reflect on authentic love, we need look no further than Calvary. The cross is all about a God who reaches down from heaven to us, not because he saw anything attractive in us, but because he wanted to save us and

secure a bride for his Son. If the truth be told, we were by nature his enemies, we were on the side of the opposition, we were guilty hell-deserving and devil embracing sinners, we were repulsive to his pure unsullied holiness; yet, this God of grace and mercy, in a sovereign act of free will, set his love upon us and drew us to himself. That's agape love, that's divine love, that is God's love! As someone has said: 'It needs no aphrodisiac to turn it on. It is a love born out of a heart whose nature and purpose is love. It is a love which takes the initiative, and that not in self-seeking passion but in self-denying grace.' John's brief statement in verse 16 tells us three vitally important things about the death of the Lord Jesus. First, his death was voluntary, for he laid down his life. This is the rich quality found in the character of the one who referred to himself as the 'good shepherd' in John 10. Second, his death was vicarious, for he died on behalf of others. He laid down his life for us! The preposition 'for' is of mega importance in the phrase I have just quoted. It means 'in the place of, instead of' and the implication is crystal clear. It suggests that the death of Jesus Christ was substitutionary. And, third, the death of Christ was victorious. The tense of the verb which John employs here is crucial to our understanding of the text. The words 'laid down' signify a once-for-all action. When Jesus died on the cross he exclaimed in glorious triumph, 'it is finished.' That means his death was that of a champion having pulled off a massive coup against the old enemy. So, when we talk about love, the pre-eminent example is that of Jesus. He is the prototype! John doesn't stop there, he takes his argument to a logical conclusion when he says at the end of verse 16, 'And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.' The test of our commitment and love to Jesus Christ will be seen in our attitude to our brothers and sisters in the global family of God. If that's what Jesus did for us, the least we can do is to show a similar spirit on behalf of others in the household of faith. Our relationship with others will be one of love, we will do for them and we will share with them without any thought of ourselves, we will freely

give to them without counting the cost and with no thought of getting anything in return. This kind of love does not look to be reciprocated, it is happy to give; and it is happy to keep on giving even when it runs the high risk of being spurned or, perhaps, less than appreciated, or, maybe even misunderstood. The thought which John is advocating here is a willingness to invest our lives in others so that they too might experience the enriching love of God. And, if the crunch came, we should be willing to sacrifice our lives for their sake. A senior student once told the graduating class of a California high school, 'Class, I want you always to remember, it's your attitude that will determine your altitude!' In the light of the apostle John's comments in verse 16, I have a feeling he would be happy to go along with that, I think he would agree! John brings it even closer to home when he poses a serious question in verse 17, this is how he expressed it: 'If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?' My, what a challenge that is to all our hearts! This is John's theology earthed to reality, he scratches where people are itching. The punchline is: there's the need, what are you going to do about it! We have plenty of food on our table, we have clothes on our back, we live in beautiful homes, we have all that we need and sometimes we have more than we need; says John, there's a brother with an obvious need, what are you going to do to help him in his hour of crisis? What are you going to do to help alleviate the situation? That's where our love is tested! That's where actions speak louder than words! When the need is presented to us, what is our initial response? Is it to walk on by with our noses in the air and humming a worship song, is it to stop and have a closer look and determine to not get involved, or will we take on board the mindset of the good Samaritan in the parable Jesus told? That's the strategy John is actively promoting here in verses 16 and 17. He draws the strands of his argument together when he says in a kind of rallying call to the troops in verse 18, 'Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.' The exhortation is a

powerful one, he exhorts us not to be loving with the empty evidence of words, but with the genuine evidence of actions. In other words, put your money where your mouth is! God is not fooled by our fervent prayers for the starving millions, he is much more concerned about how we respond to that particular case of need next door. You can see that with John's use of the word 'brother' in the singular whereas in the preceding verse it was in the plural case. The bottom line is, there is little we can do for those starving millions around the world except donate a few pounds to some worthy cause. But there is no limit to the big-hearted generosity we might show to the individual down the street if we valued him highly enough. It's a matter of keeping everything in perspective, the love John is speaking of is one which focuses primarily on individual personal needs, it is not something we target on a vague generalised beneficence to the human race. The two-liner sums it up well: 'To love the world, to me's no chore; my big trouble, is the man next door.' Well, we smile at that, but there a lot of truth in it! That's what they practised in the early church, they had a genuine concern for the man next door; the early church was renowned not only for its doctrinal purity but also its down-to-earth expressions of love. The emperor known as Julian the Apostate complained during his relatively short reign from AD 361 to 363 that 'the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well.' That's the brand of love that John has in mind, it's the kind of love which can successfully impact every community and result in lives being transformed to the glory of God. It's infectious, it's contagious. I think as the people of God, we really need to get our act together on this issue and be seen to be proactive in our commitment to one another. There is no room in John's thinking for a cosy and cushioned arm-chair philanthropy where every thought counts, that kind of faith cuts no ice so far as John is concerned, it's as dead as dodo; and that kind of love is a poor reflection of Calvary, for it's not really love at all. The old preacher, Rabbi Duncan, used to say: 'If you are without love, then the church bell is as good a

Christian as you!' Sounds a bit like Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, doesn't it?

Confidence is the name of the game! That's a key word in the Bible. It makes a world of difference in your life and mine if we know with assurance the one in whom we have believed, the one to whom we have entrusted our future. Assurance of salvation is a tremendous bonus for the believer living as we do in the third millennium. The corresponding Greek word is the word 'parrhesia' which has its roots in the world of politics, it signified the democratic right of free speech. Slowly but surely it came to mean the kind of candid openness that is not afraid to expose itself to public gaze. It's the 'no hidden agenda' syndrome, it's when you put all your cards on the table. It's a word which is frequently used in the book of Acts to describe the fearless way in which the apostles preached the gospel of Christ. When we come across it in John's epistle it has much more to do with one's personal assurance than with worldwide evangelism. In verse 21 it is used in this way where we read: 'Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence (parrhesia) before God.' The same word is found in chapter 4:17 where John informs us, 'Love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment.' It's the confidence factor which John is addressing now in his letter, it's all about assurance. Over the last few weeks we have looked at a number of tests which an individual can conduct to see if he really is a believer or not, there are certain procedures we can follow which will authenticate our Christian experience or otherwise. John wants us to be sure, he wants to eliminate all doubts from our hearts and minds, he longs to remove any trace of uncertainty regarding the reality of our faith in Jesus Christ. What we don't always realise is this, the whole question of assurance or confidence is closely intertwined with the subject of love that we have just been thinking about. There is a connecting link between them; in fact, the more we read of John in the second half of his book, the more obvious it

becomes that Christian love and Christian confidence are really two sides of the same coin. Let's hear what John says in verses 19 and 20: 'This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.' Those are fascinating words, they really are! But like so much in Scripture, there's a lot more to it than meets the eye. Someone has said, 'This is a passage which commentators delight in, because it is so pregnant with tantalising ambiguity.' I suppose there are at least half a dozen ways these verse could be legitimately translated. I think the most important issue is the meaning of the phrase tucked in the middle of verse 20 where John declares that 'God is greater than our hearts.' If we get this right, then everything else will fall neatly into place! Does John mean that God is greater in the sense that he is likely to be more severe with our failures than we are ourselves? When all is said and done, our hearts are only aware of a fraction of our sins, but God misses nothing, the one who is omniscient sees all things. The question is, is God's overwhelming greatness presented as a serious challenge to us? We can reason like this, if our own morally seared consciences give us no peace of heart and mind, what hope can we have of peace before a God whose holiness is untarnished? That is one way of unpacking the teaching of John in this duo of verses; actually, you will be interested to know this is the way John Calvin and Augustine chose to interpret it. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones was singing from the same song sheet for he also believes that this verse is not meant to comfort us but to warn us. On the other hand, does John mean that God is greater in the sense that he is able to be more merciful with our failures than we would be ourselves? Some of us know from personal experience and we all know from observation that a person with a sensitive conscience and a tender heart has a hard job forgiving themselves, such people tend to magnify failure and blow it up out of all proportion, when they find themselves in such a blur they are inclined to obscure the positive and upbeat aspects of their

lives; it seems to me, what we need to remember is this, God sees everything in perfect perspective. He sees the entire situation in sharp focus. Now, if that is the proper way to understand the text, and I think it is, then God's greatness is not seen as a threat to us, instead it's a source of enormous consolation and comfort, it means our God is able to overrule all our anxious doubts. The bottom line is, he knows us an awful lot better than we think we know ourselves, he can read us like a book! So, these words are not an indictment against us, they are words of reassurance for the child of God. The old Puritan, Thomas Brooks, called assurance 'the suburbs of paradise.' The problem John is wrestling with is that so many of these first century believers felt as though they were living out in the wilds of the bush! I have a hunch that many of us can easily identify with them! In fact, I would go further and say, that it is par for the course for genuine believers to suffer feelings of spiritual uncertainty. It happens to all of us from time to time, we know the feelings which so easily ravage our minds and we end up on yet another guilt trip, this is what transpires when as John says 'our hearts condemn us.' It's true that some folks will suffer more than others because of their psychological makeup and because of their temperament, but none of us is immune, because nobody is perfect! Any believer worth his salt wants to know whether his faith is real or not, he wants to know if he is anchored to the rock or if he is tied up to some shifting object embedded in quicksand. The prayer of David in Psalm 139:23,24 for God to search him is a reasonable one to pray in such circumstances; on the one hand, the unbeliever will find the experience too hot to handle, on the other hand, the Christian will be affirmed in his faith, our faith will be strengthened as a direct result of it. So, when the going gets tough, we need to make a beeline to God, we need to zoom in on the character of God, we need to appreciate who God is and what our God is like. That seems to be the gist of verse 20. Paul was battling from a similar crease when he penned Romans 8 verses 31,32 where he says: 'What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?'

He who did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?' Yes, there are occasions in your life and mine when we need to be reminded of the awful holiness of God; and there are plenty of other times when we need to be reminded of his abounding graciousness and his unfailing and undying love. Even when we feel as though our backs are to the wall and we feel we have been dragged through a thorn bush backwards, it's good to know that 'the Lord knows those who are his.' There's another way to combat the problem, we need to get up out of our seats and get out there and gently minister to the needs of other people, that way we quickly forget about ourselves and gradually the confidence factor returns to our hearts and minds. Assurance will not be nurtured through wallowing in self-pity or ploughing a lonely furrow in the dark vale of depression. Moping is no substitute for active service! Take heart, then, and just be glad your confidence is rooted in God, not in man!