

## **1 John 2:28-3:10 “God’s Love, Our Response” June 5, 2005**

A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith

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**The sermon in a sentence:** God’s lavish love for his people motivates us toward attaining the goal of becoming like Jesus.

**Why I am preaching it:** So that God’s love for us will move us towards a Jesus-like life.

Late May and early June are happy times, because we celebrate with people who have reached the goal of graduating. Often it has been a struggle. People have wonderful and poignant stories of how they almost gave up along the way, but they kept going. A few days ago I got a graduation invitation from a mother that read in part, “Please join us at the momentous celebration. He has worked very hard towards it.” That is exactly right. A graduation ceremony is the celebration of lots of hard work, and of hundreds or even thousands of little decisions made over many years that finally resulted in reaching the goal.

As our friend the Apostle John nurtures the house churches in Ephesus, he lays before them the amazing goal of becoming like Jesus. He encourages them towards the goal by pointing to God’s great love for them. He warns them that ignorance and doubt could keep them from attaining their goal.

It will not surprise us at all by now to know that both the goal and the way to get there have something to do with John’s rope of three strands: believing rightly about who Jesus is and what he has done; being in loving relationship with our Christian brothers and sisters; and becoming more and more like Jesus in our actions. All three strands of the cord are represented in this passage, but we will find an emphasis on right actions, or becoming like Jesus. So let’s jump in and take a look: What is our goal as Christians? How can we attain the goal? What do we have to look out for along the way?

Perhaps most people think that the goal of the Christian is to get to heaven. But that is only part of a much greater plan that God has for us. It is an amazing goal that John lays out here, a seemingly impossible goal. It is found in a couple of different places in the passage. Let’s take a look at them. Chapter 2, verse 28 says, “...when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.” “His appearing” means the time when Jesus comes again to judge the world and to do away with all sin.

Whether at that time or at the time of our deaths, we will all stand before Jesus and render an account of ourselves.

One woman told me that she couldn't imagine standing before Jesus confident and unashamed. Can you? As you think back on everything you have said, done, and thought, do you expect to be confident and unashamed at the final judgment? It sounds impossible, even crazy, but John lays it out as a goal that he expected his beloved children to reach.

Then it gets even more amazing, more impossible. Let me describe someone to you: "He has no hint of sin in any of his thoughts, his words, or his deeds. He is a delight to be around. He brings out the best in everybody that he meets. If you want to know what God is like, just spend time with this person."

Who do you suppose that I am describing? I imagine that most of us would say Jesus. But listen again to chapter 3, verse 2: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." We will be like Jesus. That wonderful, sinless person I just described will be us! Now we can see why we will not be ashamed when Jesus appears. Why should we be ashamed of being with Jesus? We ourselves will be just like him!

So there is the goal: to be like Jesus. A very attractive goal. Seemingly an impossible one. How can we get there? John's first instruction is so simple that we might easily miss it. He says, in 2:28, "Continue in him."

You only need to continue in things that take a long time. The graduation analogy helps us here. Graduation is not something that just happens to you some morning in June. It is the natural result of the whole direction your life has taken for years. That is actually good news. It means that all you need to do is one homework assignment, then another, then a quiz, then an exam, step by step, little by little. You don't do it all at once.

The same is true of becoming like Jesus. It is not something that automatically happens to us when we die, much less when we become Christians. It is the natural result of the whole direction that our life takes over many years. We do not have to get there all at once. Just as in

graduation, we can get there even if we fail some tests or even a class or two along the way. But we do need to be taking step after step after step.

So John encourages us to continue, step by step, to engage in little acts of daily obedience, always keeping the goal in mind of becoming like Jesus. Then he gets out his big guns. Listen again to 3:1. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”

Love is perhaps the most powerful force for change, and God has lavished his love on us. Sometimes I like to stop with just one word of the Bible and think about it for a while. What does “lavish” bring to mind? We usually think of “lavish” as meaning, “sparing no expense.” There was an article in the paper recently about how engagement ring diamonds are getting bigger and bigger, or more lavish, among high income people in our country. You can see TV shows that showcase lavish weddings and receptions. Everything is perfect. Expense is no object. People are fascinated by lavish spending. They are drawn to it.

John reminds his congregations that God’s love was more lavish than huge diamonds or a \$50,000 wedding reception. He gave his son. Any of you who has lost a child knows better than I do what a lavish gift that was.

You will see that John has brought us back to the first strand of his rope. We remember who Jesus is and the price he paid for us; that is, we have right belief. As we recognize Jesus as the lavish love-gift of God on our behalf we will be motivated to continue on the journey of becoming like him—that is, towards right action, another strand of John’s rope.

As people know they are loved, as they reflect on that love, they change. They are motivated to be and to do things that they would not otherwise be or do. A woman in our Hope Fellowship group lives in a care home. She told me about a lady who spends most of her time sleeping. Apparently her room overlooks the parking lot. When one particular car comes, she recognizes it. That is the one time that she gets out of bed. She is thrilled when the man she loves comes. She goes to meet him. They hug, they hold hands. His love brings her to life emotionally and spiritually. It is possible that she is still alive physically because of those visits. That is the power of being loved.

Now think for a minute about the one who does the loving. When you love someone, you will do everything possible to make that person flourish. The daughter of one of my cousins was not doing well academically. As she advanced through elementary school her parents and her teachers knew something was wrong, but nobody could figure out what. Finally it came out that she had dyslexia, that she was unable to read.

My cousin and her family went into action. They researched and found the best program in the country to deal with that form of dyslexia. The program was too expensive for my cousin to afford by herself, but the grandparents helped financially, and the girl was able to complete the program. She is now able to read, and is progressing well.

It was a heartwarming story for our family, but nothing out of the ordinary. That is the kind of thing that parents and grandparents do naturally out of love. Parents drop everything and move across the country so that their child will have the best chance at an organ transplant. It happens all the time.

If that depth of love is possible, even normal, for human parents, then how much more is it like God to spare no expense on our behalf. He will stop at nothing until we reach the goal of becoming like Jesus. The best parental love is just a hint of the lavish love that God pours out on his children.

If what John has just said is true, and it is, then you would expect that we would all be highly motivated to become more and more like Jesus. We would all rejoice in the love of God. We would resist any selfishness, of hurtfulness in our lives. We would be as quick to forgive others as our heavenly Father is to forgive us. We would recognize greed or lust or envy in our lives and we would be quick to confess it to our loving Father and to deal with it.

But that hunger for becoming like Jesus is not automatic with Christians. If it were, John would not have needed to write this letter. As he warns us in 3:7, we can be led astray.

I think there are two ways we can be led astray: We can be ignorant of God's plan, or we can doubt God's love. The first one, ignorance, is fairly easy to deal with, and John does it. In 3:7-10, John tells us what God's purpose or plan is: to destroy the works of the devil, to create now in this life a family of children who are not characterized by sin. Heaven is part of

God's purpose, but only part of it. The process of becoming more and more like Jesus begins now. You will meet Christians who are ignorant of what God is about. We need to make sure in our new members' classes and in our children's and adult education classes, and from the pulpit, that we are all clear about how lavishly God loves us, and how his purpose is to make us like Jesus. Ignorance is fairly easy to combat.

But there is a more subtle and dangerous way that we can be led astray, and that is to doubt, or at least to misunderstand very badly, the love of God. Remember my cousin and her daughter? What would we think if my cousin had said, "Oh well, my daughter can't read. That's just how she is." What would we think of parents who said, "Well, my little boy's heart is not functioning well. That's just how he is," and did not seek any medical help? We would be shocked. That is not what parental love is like, and it is certainly not what God's love is like.

God's love is not passive and distant. He desires passionately to make us like Jesus. He will spare no cost if we will just allow him to work in us. And remember that John's letter was not addressed to an individual, but to a congregation. God loves the whole congregation. He desires that the whole congregation become more like Jesus, and that each member show the love of Jesus and help the other members along the path. The strand of becoming like Jesus, or right action, requires the strand of right relationships, or love for one another.

Listen to 3:9: "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God." John does not mean that it is impossible for sin to exist in a Christian community. He has already told us that we will continue to need forgiveness. He means that it makes no sense at all, it is crazy, for Christian individuals or a Christian community to sin, to take it lightly when we are not becoming more like Jesus. How can we respond to God's love that way?

When we become aware of damaging thoughts or behavior in ourselves and say, "Oh, that's just the way I am"; when we see it in our Christian brothers and sisters and say, "Oh, that's just the way they are," we are saying, "God does not care enough about me, or about my Christian brother or sister, to bring change and healing." Of course that is not the case. God's love transforms. And he usually uses our fellow Christians as his agents of love towards us.

Let me tell you two stories. The first was told to me by a BIH student who attends another church. Two Christian friends of his got married, and the wife joined a Bible study. After a while she became dissatisfied in her marriage, and began an affair. Some people in her Bible study approached her about her behavior, but she said, “Well, God wants me to be happy, and this is making me happy.” Because the group wanted to be loving and accepting, nothing further was said or done. She got a divorce. She is still in the Bible study, but she is upset with the members because they are not cheering her on for her decisions. You see how all three strands have come unraveled? This woman has lost her right belief in who Jesus is and why he has come, and therefore has lost her commitment to right action. And the community has not exercised the true love that might have brought her back. They have lost sight of the depth of God’s love for her.

Here is the other story, that I heard at Honolulu 2005. Two young Christian men developed a close friendship; we will call them Frank and George. Frank was a little older and served as a mentor. He became aware that George was involved in some inappropriate sexual behavior. One evening while sitting in George’s car, Frank brought up the subject of George’s behavior. George’s response: “It’s none of your business.” Frank wouldn’t give up so easily. He pointed out the close friendship they had, the mutual commitment they had to each other’s growth as Christians. How could his friend’s sin be none of his business? George exploded and yelled, “Get out of my car!”

Frank left. A week later, George called, apologized to Frank, and said, “We’ve got to talk.” George acknowledged his sin, and accepted Frank’s help in resisting it successfully. A couple of years later, Frank was a groomsman in George’s wedding—a wedding that might very well never have occurred if it had not been for God’s love as demonstrated in Frank’s loving and risky confrontation.

“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.” As does any parent, God will stop at nothing on our behalf. As individuals and as a congregation he is with us every step of the way as we purify ourselves and as, decision by decision, we love each other into becoming like Jesus.

Let us pray.

