

Marks of a Healthy Church (8): Love One Another

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Marks of a Healthy Church

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Let us read in 1 John 3 and verse 14. 1 John 3:14.

14 We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.

Have you ever woken up in a bed in a strange place and wondered, "Where am I?" You look around and you don't recognize the surroundings and you begin to look for clues. You look at the fixtures and the fittings and the furniture to try and figure out where you are until eventually it dawns on you that maybe you're in a hotel or in some friend's home somewhere. Well, have you ever maybe also woken up spiritually and wondered, "Where am I? Where am I spiritually?" You maybe want to look around and see are there any fixtures, any fittings, and furniture in your life, any signs that would help you discern, help you to figure out, "Where am I spiritually? What state am I in? Where am I in my spiritual journey?" Are there any clues that can help us answer that question, "Where am I spiritually?"

Well, that's one of the reasons, probably the major reason in fact, why the first letter of John was written. It was to help God's people understand, figure out, "Where am I spiritually?" There are a number of clues scattered throughout this book. We'd like to just look at one of them today, the mark given to us in verse 14, "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren." Here John really depicts somebody on a journey going from a starting point to a finish point, going from one place to another, going from death to life and being transported there, and he's saying we can know if we've been on that journey, we can know if we have passed, if we've been transported from death to life because God's given us a big clue to look for, one of the fixtures, one of the fittings, one of the pieces of spiritual furniture in a person's life who's made that journey is, this mark, we love other Christians. We've arrived at life if we have love for our Christian brothers and sisters.

As you know, we've been looking at the various marks of a healthy church. We've looked at verity or truthfulness. We've looked at purity, holiness. Now we come to charity, that is, love, and that's actually a very important order to observe. We can get into very serious problems if we put love at the very top. If we start with love, then we can go very

wrong because that becomes the controlling factor of all others. Love is certainly very important but unless we put truth and holiness, veracity and purity first, then our love will really just be jelly. It will be just wishy-washy. It'll be indefinable. It'll just have no substance to it. It'll have no guidelines to it. Therefore we come to this mark, third, and in doing so we're, of course, looking at Lord's Day 21 and this mark really is picked up for us in Question 55 which you can find at the back of your Psalters on page 49. Question 55 asks, "What do you understand by the communion of saints?" The Answer is, "First, that all and everyone who believes, being members of Christ, are in common partakers of him and of all his riches and gifts. Secondly, that everyone must know it to be his duty readily and cheerfully, to employ his gifts for the advantage and salvation of other members." But we'd like to look this morning at this journey. We'd like to, first of all, look at our home. Then we'd like to look at this journey. Then we'd like to look at the destination which is where we'll spend most of our time. Then that last section as we look at where we want to be, I'm going to give you 10 love challenges.

First of all, let's look at our home and our home here is made very clear, our home is death. We know we've passed from death to life. This is where we start. We start in death. Now what kind of death has been spoken of here? Well, it's spiritual death but we really understand spiritual death only by understanding physical death. What's physical death? Well, at its core it's separation. Separation. Physical death is separation of the soul from the body. The soul and the body which have been together in union is then ripped apart and separated by God and that results, of course, in death and in decay of the body. It results in the bodily senses ceasing to work. There is no thought left in the body. There is no feeling left in the body. There is no communication and it's humanly impossible to reunite that soul and body again. That's what physical death is, it's a separation that results in decay, that results in a loss of our senses, our thoughts and our feelings, and that we cannot bring back together again ever, humanly speaking.

With that and saying to physical death, we can better understand spiritual death because at its heart, it too is about separation. Death is separation and if it's spiritual death, it's spiritual separation meaning the soul is separated from God, from its life-giver, and separated from God, alienated from God, disconnected from God, that results in decay and death and decay in the soul. It means that the soul has no spiritual senses. It cannot see. It cannot hear. It cannot savor. It cannot smell. It cannot taste. It cannot touch. None of its spiritual senses are functional. It cannot think. It is disconnected from God and it is humanly impossible to bring that soul and God back together again.

This is what's meant here when it speaks of death and that's how we're born, we're born in this state. We're physically alive but spiritually dead. This is how we come into this world. This is how as soon as we were conceived, as soon as we were given physical life, there was spiritual death. We're born dead in trespasses and sins. This is our home. This is our natural habitat as human beings, and this is an ugly home to live in. The fixtures and fittings and furniture are hideous. Ill-will is over there. Up in the wall there is malice. Desire to see others fail is this sort of oxygen in this home. And it's cold and it's loveless. Vengeance often erupts in it. It's an ugly home. Maybe you recognize this home.

As you look in your own heart, in your own soul, God has given you some clues to tell you where you are spiritually. If you look in you and you feel that in general as you look around you, as you look around even in this church, that you don't really feel goodwill to people, you don't really want people to succeed. You enjoy hearing when people fail or fall. You bear malice. You desire vengeance. You really have no great passion to do good or rejoice in the good of others, then you're still where you were born. This is still your home. But thankfully we're told here it's possible to make a journey. The apostle says, "We know we've passed from death." So this is not a home from which there are no roads. No, there is a road, there's a road out of this ugly, hideous, broken-down, dead home.

The word here for "past" is the word for "transport." We know we've been transported, and that really tells us that this is not a journey we make ourselves. It's a journey that somebody makes for us and carries us along, transports us. Now people can try to make this journey themselves and many still do, maybe you are, and maybe you think that you can get from death to life by being good and doing good, and yet you know that in your heart that it doesn't match. You may even be doing good to another person and yet you don't really have love in your heart towards them. You cannot get yourself out of this home. You cannot make this journey yourself and if you try, you'll end up broken-down or lost and no nearer spiritual life at the end of your life than you were at the beginning. And maybe others will come along and say, "We can help you make this journey. We can take you from death to life."

Maybe liberal Christianity will come along and say, "We can give you a cheap ticket. It won't cost you much. You don't have to believe a lot, don't have to do a lot." Maybe the cults will come along and say, "Here, we've got a shortcut, a quicker way." Others might come along and say, "Hey, we've got a more exciting way, a more glamorous way, a more popular way." But all of them end in death. None of them can move you out of this house and towards life.

All of these methods of transport ultimately break down. They have never gotten anyone from death to life. There's only one way to get from death to life, to move from this home to another happier home and that's through Jesus Christ, the great embodiment of love who died such a death, so full of love, in order that he could impart and communicate and fill others with his love. He alone can rejoin the soul with God. What's humanly impossible, what's religiously impossible, is possible in Christ. Here's your only hope of getting from death to life. Here's the transport that's been spoken of here. He's tried, he's tested, and he's successful. He's never tried to get someone out of death into life and failed, and no one in death in this home has ever asked him, "Get me out of here," and he's turned a deaf ear. Never. Commit your soul to him and him alone, and he can get you, and he will get you from death to life. He carries you. He reunites you with God who is life and love, pouring life and love into your own heart through trust in him, and especially in his death. He's never taken a wrong turn with a soul that he's carried, with a soul that's committed itself to him. Here is your transport.

And where does he take us? Well, as John says here, he takes us to life. We know we've passed from death to life where the soul is no longer separated, alienated, but united with God. There's union and communion. There's communication. There's expansion. There's growth. There's development. Their soul is now characterized by life and one especial mark of that life which is love. John says here we know. We know. It's not we can be fairly sure, we can have a good hope. No, it's not that. It's we know that we have passed from death to life, and here's the clue, here's the fixture or the fitting or the furniture that gives us the clue, that gives us this assurance, that gives us this knowledge: because we love the brothers. We love the family of God. Such a beautiful mark. What a different home this is to the home of death and hatred and malice. Here's a home that's full of life and full of light and full of love.

So what can we say about this love, this home that the Lord takes us to? Well, first of all, just want to say very briefly this love is secondary. Again as we've said at the beginning, it's important not to put love primary, love is a consequence of life. That's where we must start, life. We don't get spiritual life by loving, we get spiritual life in order that we can love, and we will never truly properly love the brothers without that spiritual life. Love is secondary to life.

But secondly, this love is reasonable. It should be sort of just normal, automatic. Why is that? Why do we say it's reasonable? Well, just the very fact that it's called love of the brethren, of the brothers, of people within the same family. There are many many reasons why this love should be in the heart and soul of somebody who does have spiritual life. 1. We all have the same Father. If we're brothers in Christ, then we have a common holy and heavenly Father. 2. As brothers and sisters, we are members of the same family and household. Thirdly, we bear the same image and likeness. There's a similarity. It really doesn't matter what social class we come from, what age we are, what color we are, what nationality we are. There are huge differences in all these areas in how we look and appear, and yet where there is spiritual life and spiritual love, there's a similarity. There's a fundamental likeness sharing and we know this, don't we? We can meet somebody who's very different to us, maybe from a very different culture or a very different socioeconomic background, or of a very different age, or very old maybe to us, or very young to us, and however much we differ, yet we sense an identity, a unity, a likeness. There are things that we just connect with. And perhaps it's when we travel abroad that we see this most, or we meet someone who's traveled here from abroad and, you know, just the differences are vast, and yet we feel there's just that connection. It's family. It's family. It's a family likeness. It's a family similarity. Our spirits are the same. They bear witness. They connect at a deep level, not at a surface level, at a very deep spiritual level.

It's reasonable because we bear the same name, Christians, Christ's ones. We have the same privileges in this family, everyone equally, equally sons and daughters, equally privileged with all the possessions of Christ being ours. We are joint heirs with him.

We're all going to live together forever so it's reasonable that we get on a bit while we're down here below. It's reasonable because we've got enough quarrels with people outside

the family, never mind starting to add quarrels from within the family. There's enough enemies without, we need therefore to cultivate friendships within.

So this love is secondary and this love is reasonable but, thirdly, this love is practical. This love isn't just a feeling. There should be a feeling, there should be an emotional component to this, and when it's at its height, yes, there should be wonderful emotional and affectionate enjoyment in it, but it's not always the case. Love is, first of all, most practical. Just do it, in other words. That's what love is, it's a doing and often in the doing that the affections and the emotions can grow and develop and strengthen. But they certainly won't unless our love is being practical, is resulting in loving deeds. It's like God's love, God so loved the world that he did something, he gave his only begotten Son. This is of tremendous help to us, especially when there are Christians in the family that we don't particularly like and that's to be expected. We are very different in our backgrounds and our personalities and our characters, our ways of speech even, and therefore there are very many natural barriers to actually liking some people. But the wonderful thing about Christian love is, we can love even those we don't like, the people that we're not naturally drawn to and attracted to because Christian love is doing. And also as many of you know, in the doing and seeking to practically love people we do not particularly like, it's amazing how much liking can grow in the doing of it.

But this is where I'd really like to give you 10 love challenges, 10 practical ways in which we can grow our love, show our love, demonstrate our love. We would love for this church to be known for the love we have one for another. Is that not how the disciples of Christ were distinguished from other people? "By this shall all men know that you're my disciples if you love one another." One of the most powerful witnesses is a church that's full of love. Yes, we need to reach out but what happens when people come within these walls, what do they sense? What do they detect? Is it obvious, is it clear, is it demonstrable, is it provable that we love one another? There's much love in this congregation. Of course there is. I've felt it. You've felt it. But we can still grow it and develop it. There's much room left for this even amongst the most loving. But there are also conflicts in this congregation, as in every congregation. There are disagreements, there are divisions. What are we doing to try and bridge these? Bring these back together again?

In these areas, I'd like to give you 10 challenges and this makes 10 challenges, that sounds a lot. I think by the end of it you'll see this is very doable. I'm not, I hope, putting the bar out of reach here. It's actually 10 very small steps but I'm asking you with the authority of God's word to start to put into practice. In some ways, you might say at the end, "Well, that's not much there." But little multiplied by much can become a lot. In other words, if we do put these little things into practice, it's amazing what the cumulative effect will be.

So let me start, first of all, with pray for one family for one month. Pray for one family. It's good to pray, of course, for the whole congregation each day. It's good to pray for families, especially those with specific sufferings, with special needs, but all I'm asking you to do here is pick one family, not your own, another family, go to the yearbook, go to

the membership directory, pick a family and just make them a matter of prayer for yourself personally and also in your family worship. Just one. Just one family for one month. Maybe not every day but regularly for one month, pray for one family. Is there any more loving thing we can do for anyone else other than pray for them? I mean, we just cannot express love in a greater way than prayer. And I'm sure we do pray for families from time to time but make it structured, make it systematic, make it a discipline so that it's done, because it so easily becomes undone. Do you think we could manage that? One family for one month? Imagine what that might produce within the congregation if everybody did that? We would all feel it. It would be noticeable, I believe. It would be evident. Pray.

Secondly, speak to one person in the course of the next month. Speak to one person in the course of the next month. Again, it doesn't seem a lot, does it? You say, "Well, I do speak to people." Yeah, but it's usually the same people, isn't it? We sit, we come in the same door, we sit in the same place, we go out the same way, we park in the same part of the car park, and therefore we meet the same people every week. So why not come in a different door? Why not sit in a different place? Why not go out a different door? Why not park in a different place in the car park? Why not stand in a different place in the foyer or outside? Maximize your chances to meet the person you've never met or not spoken to for a very long time. Again you say, "Well, one person, I can do that." Well, let's see it. Let's do it.

And again somebody might say, "Well, that's not an awful lot." But again if this was multiplied by every person here, I don't know how many are here, 200 or so? That's 200 new contacts, 200 new budding friendships, 200 extra demonstrations of love. Just say hello. Just ask how they're doing. Just say, "What can I pray for for you?" Just find a way to speak to one person and for one month, just one in the month, and maybe the next month another person. Who knows, by the end of the year you could have another 12 people in your circles of love.

Pray for one person. Speak to one person. Thirdly, encourage one person in the course of the next month. If you look around you here, you see people with multiple gifts and graces, don't you? You don't need to look far. You can see Christians here who you're so thankful for, you're so grateful for. They may be an inspiration to you and they've been an encouragement to you in the past, but they don't know it. You've never told them. You maybe kind of assumed that they know but they probably don't, therefore that one person, why not seek them out face to face or by email or letter, phone call, just get in touch with them and just say, "You know, brother, you know, sister, my friend, I am so thankful to God for you because of A, B, C, D. Because you're this. Because you're not that. Or because you've been this all these years. You're an example and a model to me." Just pick out a grace, pick out a gift, pick out one Christian characteristic and just say to them, "I'm so grateful to God for his work in you and the way you display and demonstrate this characteristic."

It's amazing, you just don't know how much that could inspire and motivate and spur that person on. Lots of people are downcast and we don't know it. They feel they really don't

have gifts or graces and it might just be the very thing they need to make them keep going, persevere in this area of strength. We're so good and telling one another our weaknesses, where we fail, where we lack. Let's try and highlight in one another's lives where there's abundance, where there's overflow, where there's fullness. Encourage one person over the course of the next month.

Fourthly, carry one burden in the course of the next month. Carry one burden. There are people here carrying burdens. Some you know of, some you don't, and maybe the burden of sickness in themselves or a family member. It might be a wayward child or an unloving husband or wife. It might be financially. Somebody is really struggling to make ends meet, find work. But we all have a burden to one degree or another in one area of our lives or another. There's nobody here that doesn't even have one small burden and most of them are much bigger than that.

You say, "How can I carry, how can I get a burden off somebody onto me?" Oh, Scripture commands us to do it, to bear one another's burdens, so it must be possible. How can we do it? Well, we can do it very simply by asking, by listening, and by expressing sympathy. It's amazing what happens when you do that. As you genuinely ask after a person's welfare, as you sincerely listen, and as you express heartfelt sympathy, understanding and commit to pray for them, do you know what happens? Unseen, invisible but very tangibly, that person's burden lightens. They feel it. They walk away lighter. True, yours is increased a little, but surely you can carry one more burden. It does cost to listen, to understand, to sympathize. It does. It puts a burden on you. You don't walk away from a suffering person the same. It does weigh you down a bit. It does drain you. There is an emotional cost. But just one burden we're asking you to carry. Just one. Just one slightly greater weight and one slightly lighter person. Carry one burden.

Fifth challenge is visit one person in the next month. Visit one person in the next month. Again, in our congregation there are sick people, there are seniors that are housebound, they're in our bulletin every week. There are also people here with special needs of different kinds. There are young mothers who are caring for multiple children. It doesn't have to be multiple children either but these very stressful early years of mothering. There are many needs in this congregation, many people who would just love a visit. Just one. I mean, how long would it take? Maybe an hour? Maybe one evening? Half of an evening? Or a lunch you could arrange to meet with somebody? Or if you're immobile and you can't get out of the house to do that, if you are that young mother or you are that senior or you are that housebound person, you can visit by phone. You can pick up the phone and make contact and start conversation, express interest. That person can feel even via phone visited by you.

Again, just one person. Can you imagine again, I don't know, a couple of hundred people doing a couple of hundred visits. Maybe the children think, "Well, how can I do that?" Well, you can as well in your school, amongst your friends. Just make a point of going and talking to somebody maybe that you don't usually talk to. Express an interest or go along with your mom or dad as they visit an older person. They love to see kids. It's a

tonic. It's probably some of the best medicine they could have. Visit one person in the course of the next month.

Sixthly, give one gift. Give one gift. There are people in this congregation and they can't afford to even go out for a Starbucks once a month. They can't afford to buy one book a month. They can't afford to go out for a meal maybe a month. They can't afford to go camping even for a day in the year. Or they can't afford to even to put together the family budget each month. There are, there are people like that, maybe not many but there are some. Can we not spare a couple of dollars, maybe \$10 to buy them a good Christian book? Maybe \$20 to give a husband and a wife a night out at Appleby's? \$50, give them a night and day away camping as a family in the summer? \$100, what a difference that would make to some family budget? Just one gift that, you know, not all of us can afford even \$100 or \$50 out of our budgets each month, but maybe \$10? In the course of a month, a couple of dollars a week we could save and buy another Christian a helpful Christian book? Give one gift. Imagine again if that was multiplied among us. It's not a lot but multiplied it's huge.

Seventhly, forgive one person. Forgive one person. As we've said, there's always in every gathering of sinful human beings, there's trouble. There's disagreement. There's argument. We've been going through as a congregation the peacemaker, good time to practice with one person. Seek out that one person you've maybe fallen out with. Leave a door open to them, say, "I'd love to talk any time." It may not produce immediate results but make it possible. Even if it doesn't express interest in them, express goodwill towards them, maybe do one of these other things, but begin this process of biblical reconciliation. Forgive one person. Again, multiply that by a lot. It would be amazing how much Gospel enjoyment there would be among us, how much difference would it make if 250 of us forgave 250 others. There would be an outbreak of remarkable grace and love in our midst. And just do it once, but I think if you do it once, you want to do it again. It's so enjoyable, so satisfying, so rewarding.

Eighthly, welcome one person. Welcome one person. There are people that come to our church, almost every Sunday there's a visitor here, maybe a friend of a family in the church or another family member come to visit them, or maybe just a stranger from the neighborhood, people passing through, vacationers, complete strangers. Don't always leave it to someone else to welcome them, "Oh, somebody else will do it." No. Look out for them. Make contact. Just exchange names, even contact details. It's amazing. You know what it's like having visited other churches what difference it makes when one or two or more people come up and just make you feel, "I'm with family. It's not a bunch of strangers. They do show the communion of saints, the holy catholic church." Welcome one person.

Ninthly, share one meal. One meal. In the next 30-31 days, can we not as a congregation commit as families to take one other family or one other person or a couple in our congregation to our own homes for a meal? Doesn't need to be complicated and elaborate and show-offy. Keep it simple. Keep it informal. Keep it straightforward. If you don't, you won't do it again. Just keep it basic. Make the focus not the food and all the

surrounding things but the fellowship and the friendship, the communion with one another. Share one meal.

Tenthly, submit one preference. Submit one preference. A bit more difficult to explain. All of us believe that are biblical principles and personal preferences, there are things that are biblically provable, demonstrable, arguable, we must not give up one iota of this, but quite a lot of our lives is of personal preference as well, and one of the greatest barrier builders is when we take personal preferences and treat them like biblical principles. When we do that whether it's in the area of clothes or hobbies or leisure or whatever, when we do that, when we make a personal preference into a biblical principle, we've built barriers between us and other Christians. So I challenge you to look at your lives and look at the things that divide you from others and seriously and honestly and biblically examine yourselves to see is this really a biblical principle? Can I really argue that this is demonstrable and provable from the Bible? Or is it just the way I've been brought up? Is it just the way I like things to be? Is it just a personal preference? And if it is, then work to demote it. Work to put it into the preference column, and as you'll do it, you'll notice the barrier reducing. You'll notice that your relationship with others that you differ on in these areas of personal preference begin to disappear. Submit personal preference. Demote one personal preference. Work hard at finding them. We've got plenty. Work hard at finding one and notice the difference it will make in your relationships.

Ten love challenges. Over the course of the next month, even if you do one a month for the next 10 months, it would make a huge difference. If you did all 10 each month, can you imagine where we'll be in a year? Love is practical. As it goes on to say here, verse 17, "whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth." You see, to make this sincere, make this real, make this practical, make this, just do it. Make it in deed and in truth.

By this we can know that we have passed from death to life, if we love the brothers. When we see this kind of furniture, these kinds of fixtures and fittings in our spiritual life, assurance grows. You see that, for example, in verse 19, "And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him." The Lord is saying here, "Take this, practice it, and then look at it and use it to build your assurance, to strengthen your confidence, to remove doubts."

By this we know that we have passed from death to life, if we love the brothers. By this we can assure our hearts before him. We take our hearts before him, then we start looking at these evidences, these clues, these fixtures and fittings, and we can justifiably and biblically build confidence, assurance of faith in our own hearts. And if we don't have assurance, maybe one of the reasons is because we don't love one another, we don't have this kind of practical love. Notice here it says in verse 20, "if our heart condemn us," it said, "Look, we can have assurance through this but if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our hearts." What's this saying? It's saying if you look for life and love and

it's not there and your heart condemns you, don't just shrug it off. It's a serious problem. In fact, it's far more serious than just your heart condemns you. God's greater than your heart. God's far more holy. God's far more knowledgeable. God's a far greater judge. If our heart condemns us, "God's greater than our hearts and knows all things." Don't rest with this. Don't just make it like water off a duck's back, "Well, some people are more loving. I'm just kind of a harder tougher person." This is serious stuff. It's saying you're still in death perhaps.

Make this a matter of prayer and practice until you too can say, "I know, I know I've passed from death to life. I've made this wonderful, blessed, greatest of all journeys because I love these brothers and sisters in Christ." Amen.

Let's pray.

Almighty Lord and God, thou art love and we want to love as thou hast loved us sincerely, practically, sacrificially. O, help thy people to return this love and make more like thyself and like thy people. May there even now be those who are journeying, who are by faith being transported out of death and into life and love. In Jesus' name. Amen.