

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, October 5, 2014

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 394, 342:1, 402, 416, 412.

Lessons: Psalm 119:159-176, 2 Timothy 1:3-14, Matthew 24:1-14.

Sermon Text: 1 John 3:18-24.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

We have here again an appeal to love, and to put our love into our deeds and works. John echoes the words of James you heard last week: *"What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do."* (James 2:14-18)

The first words of our text today *"Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."* are a sincere plea for Christians to practice the love they profess. Talking the talk without walking the walk doesn't fool too many people. Even unbelievers, and especially unbelievers, can quickly smell religious hypocrisy. As James just pointed out, if you have a spare blanket, and all you can do for a shivering brother or sister is say "Keep warm," your so-called faith must be dead. In the professional sports world, it is common for agents to say to owners, "Show me the money." In other words, don't praise my client and say how important he is for your team and then offer peanuts. Your cash offer shows what you really think. God tells us *"Dear children, let us not love [only] with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."*

The mere expression of good will, unless backed up by real deeds, by acts which will provide the help for which the need is shown to exist, is worthless, is a hollow sound. We recognize that it may be forgetfulness on the part of the Christians when they fail to provide for needs which are shown to exist, but in others there is danger of damnable hypocrisy, the danger that covetousness and love of money hinder the professed Christian from showing concrete proof of the brotherly love of which he should give evidence.

Today let's consider

BELONGING TO THE TRUTH

1. *"This then is how we know that we belong to the truth,*
2. *"and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence."*
3. *"And this is how we know that he lives in us."*

This admonition to show our love is certainly timely in these last days because true love is dying out. Jesus warned us that *"Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold."* (Matthew 24:12)

When we show the love which God motivates in our lives, *"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."* Notice how he says we belong to the truth, not that the truth belongs to us. God chose us. We didn't choose him. He put his truth into our lives.

We can show God's love *"with actions and in truth"*

He says that this is how we can put our hearts at rest in his presence even though our sins condemn us. And who wouldn't be uncomfortable in the presence of a judge who could condemn us to death! Yes, as much as we hesitate to admit it, our hearts condemn us before God. We know we haven't done what we should, and that he has every right to condemn us.

But "God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything." We can't hide anything from God.

And so because God sent a Savior from sin, his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins and to set us free, John can write **"Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask."** Why is it that the hearts of the believers do not condemn them? They recognize that they are fully sinful and do not deserve anything from God. But it is because God has poured faith into those hearts to trust only in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins.

But many in the world today do not have hearts that condemn them for different reasons. They simply do not have a consciousness of their own sins. They may see evil and wrong-doing in others but not in themselves. Or they may not even know that something is sin, because they have been so indoctrinated by the sinful world that there is no such thing as "sin". They may believe that whatever you feel like doing, saying or thinking is OK, is right – unless, of course, something bad happens to you while you are doing what God condemns as sin! You know, we, too, must admit before God that we sometimes want to turn a blind eye to our own sins.

For many people, there is no consciousness of sin. There is no consciousness of wrongdoing. Many people cannot imagine that they are doing anything wrong. There is no knowledge of sin.

How is it that anyone can learn about sin and especially their own sins? How can anyone acquire a knowledge of sin that infects them? It must be from the Law of God. That Law of God is summarized in the Ten Commandments. Every Christian sermon must contain preaching of the Law of God.

Let me give just one very timely example. People, from your neighbor and your "friends" all the way up through the Supreme Court of the United States, have approved of homosexuality and even homosexual marriage. We have heard all kinds of arguments to try to make homosexuality acceptable. But God plainly calls homosexuality an abomination. (Leviticus 18:22)

But in some cases, because even their church leaders are tolerating and approving of behavior which God plainly calls sin, people may be genuinely confused about what sin is. Here is where, even in your conversations, you can plainly tell people what the Word of God says.

Jesus is very blunt: In John 8:47 he tells those who do not believe in him: **"He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God."** What a sharp indictment!

But in our text we find the opposite. **"And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us."** John here is speaking to believers.

Just as every truly Christian sermon must contain law; it must also contain the message of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. That true Gospel is not just saying "do good works" or "be good people". That true Gospel tells us that Jesus lived a perfect life and then died to take our sins away! Then follows sanctification, that is, living God-pleasing lives.

"For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything." Remember, John tells us **"Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him."**

But for the child of God who recognizes his own sinfulness and does not seek to willfully, knowingly, commit sin and live in sin and continue in sin, when our hearts condemn us we have confidence before God that he forgives our sins for Jesus' sake.

How is it that we ask anything of God? It is in prayer. And Scripture tells us about the power of prayer: **"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."** (James 5:16) John also tells us that finding satisfaction in deeds that come from faith, in obedience to God's will, will help our self-confidence. Then we will pray more confidently, present our needs boldly to the Lord, call on his fatherly obligation, trust him more, ask for things more in harmony with God's will, and receive more as well.

So as we search the Scriptures and pray in Jesus' name, we must also remember his command: **"And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he**

commanded us.” Did you notice what comes first? **“To believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ.”** Loving one another, loving anyone, comes as a fruit of faith, after faith. It is evidence of faith, not a cause of God loving us, not a cause of faith.

John reminds us of who we are: **“Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them.”**

We do not obey by our own reason and strength, just as we confess with Luther “that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him.” We admit that it is totally and wholly God’s working in us that “the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”

Our text is not moralizing or legalistic nagging. John has total confidence in the Gospel. He believed with all his heart that God passionately wanted to win people back to him. To do this he was sending his Word out everywhere, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, was making new believers wherever the Word of God was proclaimed. John believed that the Holy Spirit, working through Word and sacrament, would cause people's hearts and minds to grow spiritually.

John believed that Christian hearts are eager to please God and are open to guidance. John believed that fruits of faith, that is, good deeds, will flow out of a living Christian.

We must also recognize that whenever our hearts condemn us, that is, when Satan emphasizes our sense of guilt and fools us into thinking that we are worthless failures, we can find real comfort and satisfaction in real deeds done out of real love.

Be assured that God is greater than our hearts. Even when our own self-analysis is too confused and weak to think straight, God has us figured out and knows that we are still Christians. And he will help us find the internal assurance we need, from him, from his Word.

John says that what God wants most of all from us can be summed up in two things: to believe in his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another. He said in John 13:35: ***“all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”***. As we do these things, our sense of unity with Christ grows stronger—we live in him and he in us. We actually are part of his body, and he actually dwells within us.

John reminds his readers of one last powerful evidence that they are saved: ***“We know it by the Spirit he gave us.”*** Here for the first time in 1 John, the third person of the Trinity is named. It is the great work of the Holy Spirit to take what Christ bought for the entire world and connect it personally to people. The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit is given to those who are baptized (Acts 2:38) and that our baptism is a washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5-6). The Spirit works in human lives also through the Word of God. The Spirit is the energy source for all of the changes that God brings about in a converted Christian. The Spirit is the driving force, the life force that produces the power for Godly behavior in a Christian's life, Godly behavior such as we read about in Galatians: ***“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”*** (Galatians 5:22-23)

One of the Spirit's most precious gifts is faith – the inward certainty that God's Word is true, that we really are loved and forgiven in Christ, and that we are headed for a joyful reunion with our loving Father. Paul writes, ***“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children”*** (Romans 8:16). All Christians have the Spirit. All Christians can hear that comforting voice. John's gentle words remind us that we are not alone in our spiritual struggles. We have the power of God himself working in us.

“And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.” We don’t ignore him when he talks to us. We don’t avoid hearing and reading God’s Word. We go out of our way to follow the Lord God. Lord, assure us that we are your children by our faith in Jesus Christ, so that we may do all that pleases you! Amen.