



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“LOVE ON THE FLIPSIDE”

Scripture Lessons: I John 3:11-18

*This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, March 29, 2009.*

Last week James brought us a provocative sermon on what is perhaps the best known and most cherished verse from the whole of the gospels: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever who believes in him should not perish but may have everlasting life.” Nearly every Christian is familiar with this verse and most of us have committed it to memory. The passage reminds us that our salvation, or eternal life, is a gift of God --- a gift prompted by nothing less than God’s love for the entire world. What is more, this gift is to be received by faith, or by believing, as John put it.

Now is this all there is when it comes to salvation? Is eternal life simply a matter of believing that all of this is true --- that God’s love, which became incarnate in his only son Jesus, has been gifted to us and that by believing this, salvation is ours. Is nothing more than this required of us who would be saved? Does mere intellectual ascent to this gracious truth of the gospel secure for us eternal life now and later?

Well, there is no question but that the amazing, unmerited, unconditional love of God for a world gone awry and for sinful people like you and me is the primary, the essential, the *sine qua non*, when it comes to salvation. And yet, simply to believe in this love, this gift wrapped in flesh and blood, is not the whole of the story either, is it? It is not unless you understand that believing entails much more than mere intellectual ascent. And my friends, this is what seems to me to be the clear teaching of the Bible. Our believing, our faith, our acknowledgment of the love inspired gift of eternal life that we have received is only part of the story of salvation, albeit the major part. But there is another side to the proverbial coin, or as we might say, an easily forgotten and often overlooked flipside to this record of God’s amazing love for us.

Some years back now, I think it was in the early 90’s, the Presbyterian Church in the USA adopted as its annual theme for the stewardship season one year the question “What Does Love Require?” The question prompted much discussion. One pastor in California wrote a letter expressing his personal disappointment with the question. He was concerned about its relation to stewardship in particular but his concern was really beyond stewardship per se. This is what he wrote: “The whole thrust of Reformed theology is that God does not ‘require’ anything of us. We are saved by grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ. The word ‘require’ makes it sound as if we were compelled or obligated to give when, in fact, we should give freely and eagerly.”

Well, what do you think of this thematic question? Does love require anything of us, especially God’s love? I shared this issue with our Stewardship Committee at the time in Tennessee and they were divided on the issue. Some agreed with the California pastor but some did not. Trying to mediate the situation I suggested we change the question from “What Does Love Require?” to “What Does Love Inspire?”. Everyone agreed with that change but it did not resolve the issue, did it? Does God’s love place any obligations or requirements upon those of us who receive it?

When it comes to stewardship, despite what we may occasionally wish, we cannot require that members of the church contribute financially toward its work. We can encourage them and we can advise them. We can even say that we expect them to contribute. The Book of Order certainly says this. What is more we can remind each member that when he or she joined they promised to support the worship and work of the church to the best of their ability. But there is a world of difference between expecting this to happen and requiring this to happen. In the final analysis no one can sit in judgment on another because we do not know all of the individual circumstances. But it is true, despite what we say or do, that each person will have to give an accounting to God when it comes to this matter of stewardship.

What does love require? If we are thinking here of God's love for us and what if anything is required of us in order for God to love us, then surely we must agree with the California pastor. There is nothing we can do to merit or deserve God's love. God loves us not because of what we do but in spite of what we do. Each of us is a beloved child of his. He brought us into being and sent his son to redeem us. Paul put it this way to the Romans: "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) And again he wrote to the Ephesians: "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ." (Eph. 2:4-5)

God does not say to his children, "Because you are worthy, I love you." He says, "I love you, now live a life worthy of that love which you have received." (Eph. 4:1) He does not say, "Because you have gotten your act together, I love you." He says, "I love you. Now get your act together!" And so, if it is God's love that we are speaking of when it comes to this question, "What Does Love Require?", then there are surely no requirements or conditions upon which this love depends. It is free, unconditional, and incomprehensible.

So when we think of the love of God in a subjective sense, that is to say God's love for us, then the answer is that nothing is required. However, if we think of the love of God in an objective sense, our love for God then I would say there are surely are requirements. To be sure the Old Testament is full of requirements: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) Through the voice of Micah these requirements are spelled out not in order to become God's people but in order to live as God's people. Justice, kindness, humility are not mere options for us but rather intended to be indicative of our lifestyle. Or again, Jesus told his disciples: "If you love me you will keep my commandments." (John 14:15) And what commandments did Jesus have in mind? Commandments to love God and to love others as an expression of God's will and way.

Of course, as Christians we live, not under the law, but under the gracious love of God. In fact, love is our law. Paul tells the Romans, "Love is the fulfilling of the law." (Romans 13:10) We value the law of God and the commandments of God because they help us to understand the nature and the practice of real love. They help us to know what it means to love God and to love others. That is to say they give to love a content and a face.

So would you agree with me that if in fact we love God, then this should manifest itself not simply in our feelings or in our words but also in our actions, our deeds, our living. Whether we are talking about the sharing of our resources, the giving of our time or energies, the working toward justice, peace, compassion, or the exercise of kindness as the children of God. In our scripture lesson this morning from I John, the writer reminds us that if the love of God abides in us then of necessity we must love our brothers and sisters in need. "Little children," he writes, "let us love not in word or

speech but in truth and action.” Jesus taught the very same thing in the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Let me share with you an interesting insight which also explains why I entitled today’s sermon “Love on the Flipside.” Years ago I was corresponding with a college student who was interested in pursuing the ministry. In a letter he wrote that his Bible professor had said in class one day that while everyone knows John 3:16, many do not recognize its flipside, I John 3:16: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” It seems, therefore, if you put both John 3:16s together you will have a full orb ed understanding of the love of God in both a subjective and an objective sense. We will see that while there is nothing we can do to merit God’s incredible love, once that love has been received it obligates us to respond in a reciprocal fashion toward God and also toward others. William R. White tells a delightful story (Stories for Telling):

“There were once two brothers who farmed together. They shared equally in all of the work and split the profits exactly. Each had his own granary. One of the brothers was married and had a large family; the other brother was single.

“One day the single brother thought to himself, “It is not fair that we divide the grain evenly. My brother has many mouths to feed, while I have one. I know what I’ll do, I will take a sack of grain from my granary each evening and put it in my brother’s granary.” So, each night when it was dark he carefully carried a sack of grain, placing it in his brother’s barn.

“Now the married brother thought to himself, “It is not fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have many children to care for me in my old age, and my brother has none. I know what I’ll do, I will take a sack of grain from my granary each evening and put it in my brother’s granary.” And he did.

“Each morning the two brothers were amazed to discover that though they had removed a sack of grain the night before, they had just as many.

“One night the two brothers met each other halfway between their barns, each carrying a sack of grain. Then they understood the mystery. And they embraced, and loved each other deeply.

“There is a legend that says God looked down from heaven, saw the two brothers embracing, and said, “I declare this to be a holy place, for I have witnessed extraordinary love here.” It is also said that it was on that spot that Solomon built the first temple.”

Well, that’s the stuff of legends, of course. But it is also upon a deep reciprocal love such as this, a love between God and his children, that the church of Christ has been built. Once we have learned how deeply we are loved we discover a sacred sense of obligation and privilege to respond in kind. I pray that this will be the hallmark of First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in all the generations to come.

