*Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our heavenly Father, through the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

**1 John 3:16-24**(EHV)

16This is how we have come to know love: Jesus laid down his life for us. And we also should lay down our lives for our brothers. 17Whoever has worldly wealth and sees his brother in need but closes his heart against him—how can God’s love remain in him? 18Dear children, let us love not only with word or with our tongue, but also in action and truth.

19This is how we know that we are of the truth and how we will set our hearts at rest in his presence: 20If our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God. 22We also receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commands and do what is pleasing in his sight. 23This then is his command: that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and that we love one another just as he commanded us. 24The one who keeps his commands remains in God and God in him. This is how we know that he remains in us: We know it from the Spirit, whom he has given to us.

*Dear heavenly Father, send your Holy Spirit on us so we may believe in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ who laid down his life for us. Amen.*

If you were to offer a child their favourite food such as chocolate or ice-cream, and they say they don’t want any, would you think something’s wrong with them?

Similarly, if you were to give them a chance to do their favourite activity, such as visiting a theme park, and they don’t start bouncing around the room in excitement, would you be tempted to call the doctor?

Most parents know what excites their children, and when their children don’t respond as expected, they may wonder if something’s wrong with them. If something’s wrong, then a visit to the doctor may be in order. Then, if you visit the doctor, sooner or later the doctor might take out that cold stethoscope and listen to their heart.

In a similar way, if you know someone who professes to be ‘Christian’ but declines to be generous to those in need, or doesn’t love their fellow Christians, or refuses to forgive those who hurt them, well, there must be something desperately wrong with them and they should be immediately rushed to intensive spiritual care! Not surprisingly, one of the first things we need to do for a Christian who doesn’t love, forgive, or help those in need, is to check their heart.

In our text for today the author of our letter mentions the ‘heart’ four times when talking about loving our brothers and sisters in Christ. But before we can check out what’s going on in our hearts it would help us to know how the Bible uses the word ‘heart’ and what it’s referring to.

In this case, if you were to check a Bible concordance (which lists every Bible text where certain words are used), you’ll soon discover it very rarely refers to the heart as that busy little muscle which faithfully pumps blood around our body or the place where we feel emotions.

Most of the time when the Bible uses the word ‘heart’, it’s talking about the centre of our being as the place which motivates all our words and actions. It’s the place where our will or determination resides. It’s like the driver’s seat for all our actions and reactions.

This means, if our heart is set on doing something, then our mind, tongue, hands, and feet will do everything necessary to achieve our heart’s desires. In this way, everything follows the heart. Similarly, if our heart refuses to love or forgive or be generous, then our thoughts, words and actions will follow suit.

But it’s not just about what our heart is *set on*, but also what our heart is *filled with*.

For example, if our heart is filled with anger, then many of our actions will be in response to the anger which motivates or drives our heart. It’s our angry heart which make our mouths snap and yell at people. Our angry heart leads us to lash out, stamp our feet, slam doors, or seek revenge.

Of course, it makes sense a heart filled with anger can’t, or won’t, love others. There’s no place left for love when a heart is filled with anger. A heart filled with hate isn’t a healthy heart and therefore desperately needs to be cleansed and cured of its angry disease before it can love.

Similarly, a heart filled with hurt will be motivated by self-preservation, such as running away from a hurtful situation, or revenge, by demanding some form of justice or payback for the hurt caused.

It also makes sense a heart filled with hurt can’t, or won’t, love or forgive because its focussing all its attention and energy on self-preservation or payback. A hurt heart will focus on itself and therefore can’t, or won’t, love others rightly. A heart filled with unresolved hurt then is a heart needing a cure.

Understanding this, it’s when you honestly examine your own heart that you might be surprised to discover your heart isn’t filled with as much love, joy, peace, generosity, and mercy as you might expect. Instead, your heart may condemn you because it’s often filled with apathy, greed, lies, fear, distrust, pain, and selfishness, which means your heart needs to be cleansed and cured *before* you can love, forgive or serve like you’ve been loved, forgiven and served by Jesus Christ.

Now, while you may think no-one can rightly judge your heart except God himself, the people around you can judge your actions which unconsciously reveals what’s going on in your heart to others.

All they need to do is ‘press your buttons to get a response’ and you’ll soon discover what’s really in your heart! In this way, your words and actions reveal your heart. Your heart and its resulting words and actions condemns you by the way you don’t love each other the way Christ loves you. Your heart condemns you when you don’t love God, or love those whom he loves, with all your *heart*, soul, mind, and strength.

So, what’s the answer? What’s the cure for hate-filled, fear-filled, hurt-filled, and selfish hearts? What’s the cure for unloving and unforgiving hearts? Where do you turn when your heart (and subsequent actions) condemns you? How might your heart learn to beat more closely with God’s own heart?

Well, for starters, you won’t find the answer in your own heart. The answer also isn’t in the other person’s heart. The answer for unhealthy hearts isn’t found in anyone else except the One with a pure and perfect heart.

In this case, the cure for your diseased heart is in your Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and his love for you. Christ reveals God’s own heart for you and me through his words and actions. His willingness to lay down his life for his sheep reveals his loving heart. His willingness to forgive sinners like you and me reveals his loving heart.

His love isn’t hate-filled or fear-filled. His love isn’t selfish, but selfless. His love is willing to sacrifice himself for you and me and even those who hurt you or me.

This means he loves you, despite what’s in your hearts. He loves those you struggle with, despite what’s in their hearts. He loves you even though you continue to hurt him and those he loves.

He loves you so much he sacrificed himself on the cross for you. He paid for your sin – all of it. He even paid for the sin of those who hurt you – not because they deserve it but because he loves them too.

He loves you so much he chose to forgive you. He doesn’t forgive you because you’re worthy or loveable or have good intentions, but because his pure, perfect, and compassionate heart compels him to forgive you and cleanse you.

We struggle to understand this compassionate, sacrificial, and selfless love – but that’s the love which comes from God. That’s the love which moves God to sacrifice his Son for you and me. That’s the love by which Jesus willingly lay down his life for us. That’s the love which should fill our own hearts. That’s the love which should motivate us to speak and act selflessly and mercifully with those around us, especially toward fellow Christians.

And the way we receive this perfect divine love into our hearts is through faith.

This means the way we learn to love as Christ loves us is by believing in Jesus’ name and by believing his words of forgiveness, cleansing, promise, and grace. Those who constantly look to, and trust in, the sacrificial and selfless love of Jesus, will love like he loves, forgive as he forgives, and willingly serve as he serves.

In this way, whenever your heart condemns you because you said unloving words or performed unloving actions toward others, you look in faith toward Jesus Christ – your forgiver, your cleanser, your healer, your Shepherd, your friend, and your heart surgeon.

He knows your hearts better than you know them yourselves, and still loves you despite what’s in them. He doesn’t let what’s in your heart stop him from loving you!

As you look to, and trust in, his sacrificial love for you, his own perfect and divine love will drive out your hate and fear and hurt and selfishness so that your heart is cleansed and renewed. Let what’s in God’s own heart replace what’s in your own heart.

As you trust in Jesus whole-heartedly, you’ll naturally love the way he loves you. As he cleanses and renews your heart and mind and body and soul through his forgiving Word, through the promises of Baptism, and through your faithful reception of Christ’s body and blood, your own heart will learn to syncronise itself with the heart of Christ himself.

When this happens, people will know you’re believers in Jesus Christ as you become givers instead of takers. People will know you’re believers in Jesus Christ when you have compassion for those in need who won’t be able to pay you back for your generosity.

People will know you’re faith-filled people when you’re ready and willing to forgive those who hurt you. People will know you’re believers in Jesus Christ when you no longer let your anxieties and fears and hurt lock up your hearts, but can surprise people by how much you can love and forgive and serve others around you because God’s own love, forgiveness, and service now flows through you.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, understand that both loving and unloving words and actions come from what’s in your hearts. If your hearts are filled with anything other than the love of Christ, then you’re to look to Christ and trust him.

As you look to him to cleanse and renew your diseased hearts, your faith in him will drive out any fear, hate, greed, hurt, or selfishness which has riddled your heart. As you look to Jesus in faith, your heart will be cured and filled with God’s own love. By trusting the love of Jesus, you’ll not only love in theory, but you’ll learn to love in the practical ways of forgiveness and mercy.

Therefore, believe in the name of your Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for you, and love one another. Then people will see how much you believe in him by how much you love. Which is why…

*…the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

Pastor Stuart Kleinig

South Western Queensland Lutheran Parish – Chinchilla Ministry Area

4th Sunday of Easter

21st April 2024