

**“Lesser Loves”**  
*Sermon Series on the Book of 1 John*  
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**First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC**  
**March 29, 2020**  
**(1 Jn. 2:15-17; 5:18-21)**

**Introduction.**

A few weeks back at the beginning of Lent when we could actually meet together for worship before this pandemic settled in, I gave a children’s sermon about love to the kids. Do you remember what I said? I talked about how people use the word “love” nowadays to mean different things, and there is a difference in the way we love some things and even people. I showed the children pictures of my favorite ice cream – Graeter’s mint chocolate chip, our family dog Brandy, of me shooting a basketball, of my four grandchildren – Lleyton, Campbell, Millie, and Lucy, and also a picture of my new fiancée, Cyndy.

Then I said, “So I love all these things. I love ice cream, Brandy, basketball, my grandchildren, and I love Cyndy too.” Then I asked, “Now, do I love them all in the same way? No. I love them differently. And what if I told you that I loved ice cream more than I love my grandchildren. You would think there is something wrong with me, wouldn’t you? There are some things we should love more than others.”

Finally, I showed the children an image which says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” And I told them, “The Bible says that my love for God should come first over all my other loves, even my love for my grandchildren, even over my love for my fiancée. He is supposed to be #1 in my heart, because when I keep my love for God first, all the lesser loves in my life can be loved in the right way.”

That’s what I want to talk about this morning – Lesser Loves. And we’ll discuss it in the context of the two passages of Scripture in 1 John I’d like us to read.

**I. The Love of the World.**

The apostle John begins by talking about the way in which there are times in our lives when we love the world more than we love God. It’s a problem of disordered loves, which Augustine said was at the root of all sin. There are two choices that stand before every one of us every single day: either we love God, or we love the world. It’s a binary choice. And John says that if we love the world more than we love God, we’re going to run into problems.

Now it's important to clarify what John means when he uses the word "world" here. He's not talking about the world of God's creation, which the Bible said is good and will one day be renewed and recreated. And he's also not talking about the world of people for whom Christ died. No, he is using the word "world" in the sense of the fallen, unredeemed world, a world that is under the control of the evil one. It is a world that is shrouded in darkness apart from Christ, and it refers to the thinking, values, and the tragically disordered loves of the fallen world we live in which stand in opposition to Christ. That's what the apostle has in mind here when he uses the word "world."

There are three aspects of this fallen world John highlights in the passage about which he is concerned, and the first one is *the desire of the flesh*. The Greek word *sarx*, which is translated "flesh" in this passage, has various nuances to it. But each of them refers to our appetites, the desires of our bodies. It's natural for us to desire food, but if we're not careful that can lead to gluttony. It's also natural for us to desire sex, but if we try to satisfy that desire outside the context of marriage between a man and a woman, it will be less than God's best and always lead us down the wrong path. Our love for God helps us channel our appetites, and whenever we try to satisfy those desires in a way that deviates from the sort of expression the Bible encourages, we get ourselves into trouble.

The second aspect of the fallen world John mentions is *the lust of the eyes*. Here the eye is a metaphor for sinful passion that trips us up. An example of this would be Eve's looking at the fruit of the forbidden tree which was "pleasing to the eye" (Gen. 3:6), or David's lustful looking at Bathsheba as she bathed on the roof of her house in Jerusalem (2 Sam. 11:2). Have you ever seen a dress or perhaps a gadget you just had to buy when you really didn't have the money? The passion to possess what you saw overtook you, and you crossed a line. That's the lust of the eyes. There is a whole psychology involving the lust of the eyes that advertisers try to tap into, and pornography is a \$12 billion-a-year industry that is destroying the minds and hearts of men today. All of us need to be careful to reign in the lust of the eyes.

The final characteristic of our fallen world about which John warns is *the pride of life*. Here the apostle has in mind the way in which we tend to take our cues regarding our personal value and sense of self-worth from the things we accomplish or the opinion of other people. It's easy to get puffed up and develop a "big head" whenever we do something well or accomplish something important. This can easily lead us to desire the applause of people more than we want the approval of God, and many individuals have compromised their values and done the wrong thing in hopes that other people will like them or give them their approval. John warns his readers about this problem.

After the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt and made their journey to the Promised Land, Moses learned very quickly that it was easier to get Israel out of Egypt than it was to get Egypt out of Israel. In other words, just because you change locations doesn't mean you will change your way of thinking and the way you live your life. Even though the Hebrew people were in a new place, their values and priorities continued to be influenced by where they had previously been. It wasn't long before the people of Israel were worshipping a golden calf, and they struggled for years with the problem of idolatry because of the imprint of Egypt on their collective memory.

The desire of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life are matters you and I also have to struggle with today, and we need God's help to overcome them. Even though you've become a follower of Christ, the imprint of the world and its values has made an indelible mark on your mind and heart, and it takes the power of God's Spirit and the practice of spiritual disciplines to be transformed. Lesser loves clamor for our attention, and it is a lifelong battle. As Martin Luther once said, "I tried to drown the old man of my sin in the waters of baptism, but I discovered the wretch can swim!"

## **II. The Idols of our Hearts.**

In 1 John 5:21 the apostle concludes his letter by saying, "*Dear children, keep yourselves from idols*" (5:21). What exactly is an idol? It's easy for us to think that idols are little statues of antiquity that people made out of fear and ignorance, but idolatry is actually much more complex than that. An idol is anything or anyone that is more important to you than God is. It's anything or anyone that absorbs your heart or your imagination more than God does, and it's the thing you think will give you what only God can give. So, you see, an idol isn't just a little figure of an animal or a person to which people bowed down in the ancient world. An idol is anything that competes with God for your devotion and the first place in your heart.

The problem we have as human beings is that we have an incredible capacity to make idols for ourselves. John Calvin once said that the human heart is an idol factory. We just keep manufacturing them, even when we try to follow God. We make idols of things like romantic love, family, money, power, achievement, and even serving the Lord. Maybe being accepted in the right circle of friends is very important to you, or perhaps it's your health, staying fit, or physical beauty. Many people think these things will make them feel fulfilled or give them hope and security, but ultimately only God can provide that.

I think one of the reasons many of us have battled fear and anxiety during the coronavirus pandemic is because we have made personal peace, affluence, and security, for us and our family, an idol. We believe that keeping our children safe

and storing up treasure on earth for retirement is the primary means by which we can secure our lives, and we think it's up to us to protect and provide for ourselves and the ones we love. We have come to allow this to displace our trust in God. As we have seen, it only takes a communicable disease and a huge dip in the stock market to reveal just how much these things are idols in our hearts.

## **II. Loving God First.**

What does loving God first look like in real life? How are we to keep our love for God first during a coronavirus pandemic? I think there are several ways you and I can keep God first in our hearts during this time. For example, we can refuse to give into worry and panic and instead trust God to get us through this crisis. We can place our confidence in Christ to be with us and to help us cope with whatever happens in the future.

Psalm 91 reminds us, *“The one who dwells in the shelter of the Most High...will not fear the terror of night nor the arrow that flies in the day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.... He will call on Me, [say's the Lord,] and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him” (Ps. 91:1,5,15).*

Another way we can love God first during this crisis is by loving our neighbor, which Jesus said was the second of the greatest commandments. Instead of looking out for me and mine, hoarding toilet paper and other essentials, our trust in God frees us to share and even sacrifice on behalf of others. If we're confident that God is for us and that He will provide all we need, we don't have to approach life with a mentality of scarcity but one of abundance. We can live in the freedom that just as God feeds and cares for the birds of the air, so He will take care of each one of us and provide whatever is required.

Sharing abundantly with those in need and sacrificing on behalf of others in times of crisis has been a hallmark of the church throughout the centuries. Last month Bruce Hindmarsh spoke at our church at the Forum on Faith and Culture, and he preached at this podium that Sunday. At the end of this past week a friend sent me something Bruce recently wrote while he was flying back from a trip to Europe that was cut short because of the pandemic. Bruce writes that the Christian instinct to care for those who suffer from communicable disease and all its devastating consequences runs deep in the history of the church.

As an example, he pointed to Gregory the Great, the remarkable medieval bishop of Rome who lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Gregory was called to lead the church during one of the most difficult times in history. Repeated sieges of Rome had left famine and disease in their wake. Large parts of the city were destroyed by fire, and civil society stopped functioning altogether. And that's not all: plague was pandemic during Gregory's entire adult life, and something like a third of the

population of Rome was wiped out during these years by their version of the coronavirus.

In this bleak situation, what did Gregory do? He served his generation. He fed the poor, clothed the naked, and ministered to the sick. He devoted himself to prayer, supported the new Benedictine communities, sent out missionaries, promoted high standards for pastoral care, and he even helped run the city and kept it going.

Bruce also wrote about St. Francis of Assisi. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century Francis developed a special love for those who had leprosy (another contagious disease), and over the course of his ministry he overcame his revulsion to the bodies of disfigured lepers and embraced those who were quarantined from society and left destitute. Because Jesus became poor and outcast for our sakes, Francis came to see each leper as an icon of Christ crucified.

In his book *The Rise of Christianity*, sociologist Rodney Stark has argued that the success of Christianity in the early centuries was due in large part because of its ethic of care, not least in times of plague. For example, during a severe plague in the Roman Empire in the mid-third century, there was a bishop in North Africa named Cyprian who wrote about how the pandemic tested the humanity of everyone, and yet the followers of Christ rose up to aid those who were afflicted. Above all, he said, Christians showed their neighbors that they didn't fear death.

This same thing happened further to the east in the city of Alexandria in Egypt. The bishop there wrote in his Easter letter in 260 AD that "most of our brother [and sister] Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ." This proved to be costly business "because they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors. And many, in nursing and curing others, transferred death to themselves and died in their stead.... The best of our brothers [and sisters] lost their lives in this manner."

Bruce writes that the strange thing about the coronavirus today is that the Christian instinct to care for the suffering and embrace the outcast means, at least initially, doing the *opposite* of what Gregory and St. Francis did. Instead of physically embracing the sick and the dying, Christian charity means social distancing and protecting the vulnerable from the silent transmission of the disease. It means trying to help the medical system cope with the numbers who will become seriously ill, and social distancing is now one of the best ways we can love God first as well as our neighbor, at least initially. This means we must be especially creative to find other ways to bring the love of Christ to those who are suffering.<sup>1</sup>

**Conclusion.**

This pandemic with the coronavirus has revealed many things to us about our values, our priorities, and our desire to be in control. It has also shown us where we tend to get our security from and how fleeting that can be at times. Just as fasting reveals how much our lives are controlled by our appetites, so the coronavirus has revealed how much we look to things or other people rather than to God to help us construct a nice and safe life.

But God has used this pandemic to strip us of all those things, and we feel helpless. It's in times like these that we are thrust onto God and realize He is our only hope. I encourage you to allow the Lord to use this crisis to remind you of the importance of keeping God first in your life and to love Him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. I also encourage you to remember that the Christian life is an adventure of faith, not a comfortable ride on a cruise ship. The church is supposed to be a lifesaving station on the high seas of danger seeking to rescue those who are perishing.

I want to close by leading us in a prayer Gregory the Great wrote during the pandemic that besieged Rome. It seems most appropriate for our time as we love God and love neighbor in the midst of our own crisis.

Let us pray. *“O God, the protector of all that trust in You, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us Your mercy; that, You being our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things that are temporal, that we finally lose not the things that are eternal: Grant this, O heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake, our Lord and Savior. Amen.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Hindmarsh, <https://www.regent-college.edu/about-us/news/2020/coronavirus-and-the-communion-of-the-saints>