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1 John 3:16–17, RVSU, updated edition.

¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters.¹⁷How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Lay down our lives: The First Responder.

There are five books of the Bible attributed to people named John: The Gospel of John, Revelation, and 1, 2, and 3 John, which are letters. The Gospel is traditionally attributed to the Apostle John, and we believe that Revelation was written by a different John, whom we call John of Patmos, because he had his revelation on that island, Patmos, where he was a prisoner of Rome. 1 John seems to be written to a general audience consisting of early Christians; 2 John appears to be written to a specific early church; 3 John is written to an individual named Gaius. It is widely believed that the three John letters were written by the same person. So, there are probably three “John” authors in the New Testament. The authors of the three letters do not identify themselves. We call them John because the author seems to have an intimate knowledge of the Gospel and to be writing from the same perspective of John, of loving Jesus and loving other people

because Jesus loves them. I want to look at 1 John, which in truth is structured more like an inspired sermon. In very straightforward and expressive language, the author details the core principles of our faith. Consider this from Chapter 3, from the NRSV, updated edition:

¹³ Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. ¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brothers and sisters. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵ All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. ¹⁶ We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

It begins with “*Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you.*” When the author says “*the world*” he’s referring to a cultural objection to faith. It’s not that many people will hate believers because they follow Christ: it’s because society teaches its members to have that hatred. But we’ve transitioned from being spiritually dead to being spiritually alive with God, and the reason for this is that we have taken the love that God gives us and passed it on to others. In fact, to underscore the importance of love, the author of 1 John says that if we hate other people, we are spiritually dead and that we “*do not have eternal life*”. He ramps his argument up by saying that in this situation we “*are murderers*”. We could interpret this statement two ways. First, by showing a lack of love, we are exhibiting behavior that if other people mimic, will destroy them spiritually.

Or, perhaps refusing to offer love is a proactive emotion, a deliberate desire to see other people harmed spiritually, and thus “murdered”. He goes on to say that his evidence for this overall argument is that Jesus chose to lay down his life for us. In fact, if we truly follow and emulate Christ, *“we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters”*. When we see a brother or sister in need, we cannot refuse to help – no matter what the risk, even if we are putting ourselves in physical danger. 1 John has the most profound words and the most challenging declarations found in the Bible when it comes to sacrificial love. It holds us to an extremely high standard as people of faith.

One early morning, some years ago, as I arrived at the hospital for my shift, I was told that there was an extremely distraught woman in a private waiting room and that she was a Christian – and so perhaps I could go comfort her. I walked into that room to see a woman of about forty in a massive high-tech wheelchair. She was crying softly and clearly praying, her head down, asking God for serenity. I am, of course, changing significant details of this story to protect her privacy. I took her hand and knelt down by her chair. I told her that I was a chaplain and asked if I could please help her. She told me that she was having a panic attack. The problem, she said, was that coming to a hospital had set off her PTSD, which she said was due to a serious car accident she had been in years

before. She was supposed to get a procedure done, she said, something minor so they could diagnose the source of her pain. But when she got to the hospital, she was told that she had the date wrong and was a day early. The problem, she said, was that it had taken all the courage she could find to get into the transport van and come to a hospital. There was no way she could go home and do it all over again the next day. She was deathly afraid of hospitals, having at one point spent many months in an ICU. She asked me if there was a priest in the hospital, that she was Catholic and would really like to talk to a priest. I told her that no, we didn't have a priest on staff or have a priest currently visiting in the hospital. I told her that I am a Protestant Reverend, but that I could easily call a priest, and almost certainly I could have someone there within a few hours. She shook her head and asked me if I could pray with her. I of course did, and I offered a prayer of relief from anxiety, for God to make his presence felt, and to remain with her every moment she was in the hospital, both that day and the next, if necessary. I asked God to fill her with healing grace and to bring her to a place of calm.

In truth, I was only able to help her a bit. I got my boss and a nurse involved, and they went off to figure out what could be done for this woman, if her test could be done that day. Or could she at least be admitted for the night so that she wouldn't have to go home and come back. In the meantime, I engaged

her in conversation, asking her if she was from Colorado originally. She said no. She said that she was from Chicago. About ten years before, she had been working as an EMT, an Emergency Medical Technician. Now, when I first started working at the hospital, I began to interact with EMTs for the first time. When I was called in for what we call a Level 1 trauma, to help with a frightened patient or anguished family member, I learned that it's EMTs who typically bring in the injured person. I learned that these people, who are always ready to save our lives, work twelve-hour shifts, and often through the night, and typically earn a bit over minimum wage. They are widely considered the poorest paid first responders. Indeed, this woman in this waiting room, we'll call her Gail, was earning a few dollars over minimum wage. She was on a call, her partner was driving and racing to the scene of an accident with their lights and sirens on, when a drunk young man in an SUV T-boned her ambulance at a very high speed. He hit the ambulance in the passenger door – Gail's door. She was immediately crushed, and the ambulance was shoved into high speed, oncoming traffic. She ended up being trapped in the wrecked ambulance. Firefighters cut her out and she was transported to the hospital. She had fallen unconscious. She woke up in the ICU days later to be told that her spine was severed, and that she had had a

brain bleed. Now, she had no use of her legs and only minimal use of her arms.

She also had some cognitive problems. This contributed to her panic, Gail said.

Here is a passage from the sixth chapter of Galatians:

6 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. ³ For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. ⁴ But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. ⁵ For each will have to bear his own load.

⁶ Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. ⁷ Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. ⁸ For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. ⁹ And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. ¹⁰ So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

It is widely believed that Paul did write this letter to the faithful in Galatia.

Galatians is a beautiful, eloquent, and concise introduction to the Christian faith.

Galatians first talks about the importance of spreading the Gospel and how the story of Christ lays down the basis of all that we believe. Paul then moves on to

the main topic of the letter, and that is justification by faith. We become true

Christians simply by having faith in God, in Jesus Christ, in the way that Jesus

taught us to live with humility and forgiveness, and not by obeying any religious

laws. That is the essence of the New Covenant, the agreement between God and

us, as delivered to us by Jesus Christ. Paul also talks about grace, that unearned

gift from God. Through grace Christ lives within us, directs us, and empowers us to be the hands and mouth of God on Earth. We are God's instrument and we are God's ambassadors on this planet. We walk with the Holy Spirit, and we live for the things of God's world, not for the things of the human world.

In this passage, Paul talks about the need for regeneration after we have done something wrong. When someone else does wrong, we must always help them return to a state of grace. Indeed, we are to value others above ourselves. We are to be modest and never boast. Most importantly, we are to know ourselves, to look into our own hearts and see what is there. Before we criticize someone else, we must make sure that we have the light of true faith within us. Finally, and critically, we are to remember that we will always reap whatever we plant. A corrupt person will not be rewarded by God and will ultimately fail.

There is one line in this passage that says: *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.* Remember what 1 John says: *"we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters."* I thought of the messages of both 1 John and Galatians as I was listening to Gail's story. There she was, racing in an ambulance, on her way to rescue someone else, to save someone's life after a car accident. What happens? She ends up being the one who is severely injured in an accident caused by a drunk driver. I told Gail that I had tremendous respect

for someone who could truly live the way Christ taught us to live, to take on the burdens of other people and to risk her life for people in danger. She told me that even as a small child, she had wanted to help others, to dedicate her life to helping. She became an EMT, she said, because that was a way to truly serve God's people the way Christ taught us to do. The pay was ridiculous, but for her, it didn't matter. It was an opportunity to help people, and that was all that mattered to her. She said that since her accident, she had been living on a very small monthly disability payment.

Our Bible, our faith, the teachings of Jesus tell us that giving isn't enough. We must absorb risk. We are to do more than give our time and assets and emotional energy to help people. We are to take on their pain, their suffering, their deprivation. This is true both spiritually and physically. That is what separates a truly Christ-like life from the life of a typical Christian giver. And that is what Gail did, in a very literal sense. She sacrificed her health, her daily freedom, her ability to enjoy each day on Earth.

They did indeed find a room in the hospital for Gail that day and prepared her for her procedure the next day. I talked to Gail's older brother later that day, and her brother subsequently flew in from Chicago to be with her. As we sat in a waiting room while Gail was having her diagnostic procedure done, he told me

that their family had very little money, and that after Gail's accident, she was in a coma for many weeks. When she eventually left the hospital after her horrific accident, the best they could do for her was place her in the only nursing home that would accept the minimal payments offered by Medicaid and that had space. One day, while he and another sibling were visiting, they found cockroaches and mouse droppings on the floor under her bed. They were horrified at this and the family got together and decided to do whatever they had to do to give Gail a respectable place to live. They started searching all over the country for a better situation for her. And what Gail wanted the most was a bit of her independence back. The family eventually found a program in Colorado where she could live on her own in a subsidized apartment and be taken care of during the daytime. The only hours she spent alone were when she was asleep, and the rest of the time, there were people to help her.

Here's what our passages are all about. Both Paul and the man we call John because he was a follower of the Apostle John think of our global Church as an extended family. We are not to be competitors battling each other for the blessings of God. We don't fight to see which of us is the most devout Christian and who gives the most of their time and money and emotional support. Rather, we turn our faith outward and do so selflessly. We are brothers and sisters whose

love for each other is so strong that we are willing to bear responsibility for each other. We are indeed our brother's and sister's keepers. We don't let each other go astray. As members of that extended faith family, we protect each other. We are willing to give of ourselves and our assets - and take risk doing this. We act with humility, knowing that we are likely to be the next person who needs to find his or her way back to the Lord or who needs help with some physical need.

Gail ended up needing surgery after her diagnostic procedure. The day her surgery was performed, and it turned out just fine, I went to her room to check on her. She was groggy, but she remembered me. She asked me to pray with her again. This time she asked me to pray for the children of the woman who had been driving the ambulance in which she had been in a wreck. While Gail was paralyzed and suffered a brain injury, she told me, her partner had been killed when the ambulance was pushed into heavy traffic. She left behind two small children who subsequently were adopted by their grandparents. I offered a prayer asking God to guide these children to a life of giving like their mother's, a life of taking on other people's burdens, of a willingness to lay down their lives. I asked God to keep them safe, to let them live long, healthy lives, and to keep them inspired for the rest of their lives by the beautiful example of their mother and Gail. Gail then fell asleep and I left her room, never to see her again, I imagine.