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AN EVEN WORSE PANDEMIC

1 John 3:1-3

Laurie and I still love one of the classic movies of all time, *The Princess Bride*. There is a scene in the movie where evil Count Rugen, who is in the process of torturing the hero, Westley, has a conversation with the other villain, Prince Humperdinck. He asks the prince if he would like to watch him work as he tortures the hero. The prince says, “You know how much I like to watch you work, but I have the country’s 500th anniversary coming up, my wedding to plan, my wife to murder, and Gilder to blame for it.” Rugen then puts his hand on the prince’s shoulder and says sympathetically, “Get some rest. If you haven’t got your health, you haven’t got anything.”

That statement could be the theme for 2020. It’s all about having our health. We’ve heard how having our health is all important. I think that line is overstated, because even when we aren’t fully healthy we can still be joyful, and it is possible to be healthy and miserable. But we all know that life is way better when we are healthy. Today I want you to think with me about health, only I’m not talking just about physical health. If you don’t have a healthy soul, you really don’t have anything. If your soul is ailing even physical health won’t help. We will be thinking about that kind of health today as we look at 1 John 3:1-3.

The theme in this series is about having the fullest possible life. Today we are going to look at 3 components that go into having a full life, and they are things that we can do today that will contribute to a more full life, the life God intends for us. There is one thing to remember, one thing to know and one thing to do.

REMEMBER THE ASTONISHING LOVE OF GOD

This happens a lot at our house. Laurie says, “Oh, wow. Hey, Rick, look at that.” I’ll say, “Look at what?” She’ll say, “Look at that colorful bird perched on the limb of that tree.” I look, but I don’t see any bird. Invariably I’m looking at the wrong tree or in the wrong place. She has to say, “No, not there, look over here.” I always try to see what she’s pointing at because when someone says, “Hey, look at that,” you know it is something worth seeing. No one says, “Hey, look at that. The sun is coming up in the east today.” It always comes up in the east. “Look at that” means here is something you need to take note of. John says in verse 1, “Hey, look at that!” There is something we need to see, to look at. It is what great love God the Father has for us. There is an unusual Greek word translated “what great” in that verse. It is rather rare in the New Testament. This is the only time John uses it in his writing. There are two noteworthy facts about that word.

First the original literal meaning of the word was “from what country.” So John says, “Look at from what country the love of God has for us.” That’s a bit odd. The word came to designate something alien, something way out of the ordinary. It is foreign to us because it is different than what we know.

Our son, Toby, spent a good part of one summer when he was in college on a mission trip to China. It was a really foreign place. Things are just different there. They don’t respect personal space like we do here. They don’t line up to board a bus in orderly fashion, they just crowd and cram their way in. In many cases their toilets are just holes in the floor. We heard several stories related to that, but I don’t think I’ll share them today. Then there were some of the things they eat there. For instance, they love fried crickets. Fish eyeballs can be found on some menus. Then there’s birds nest soup, made from the nest of a small Chinese bird that uses its saliva, which hardens when exposed to air, to make its nest. Wait, so this is soup made from bird spit? You got it. There are a couple of other things they eat that I won’t even describe to you because they are too disgusting.

My point here is there are some things that are foreign, to the point of “I can’t believe it.” They are things so foreign, so strange that we can’t imagine it and would never think of it. That’s what this word suggests is true of God’s love. It is literally inconceivable to us because it is so otherworldly. In fact, a second interesting fact about this word is that according to *The Linguistic Key To The Greek New Testament* this word always implies astonishment. John in effect was saying, “Look at how astonishing the love of God is.” There is nothing else in all of creation like it. We’ve never seen or experienced anything that is close to it. John is reminding us that God loves us in a way that is astounding, that is completely different than anything else we ever have known or ever will know. God’s love literally is incomprehensible, for we can never fully grasp it.

One of the things that is kind of sad about life is that we lose some of our ability to be astounded by things, to be in awe of them. When you’re a kid everything seems so big, you encounter things for the first time and they seem wondrous, and of course your imagination creates things that are magical. But as an adult you have a sort of “been there, done that” attitude about most things. You encounter some new things, things that are cool and impressive, but it is rare to be astounded to the point of being in awe. I was thinking about things that have caused me to be in awe as an adult. I was reminded of one recently when I read a beach read mystery novel in which the main character was a surfer slash private investigator who lives in San Diego. An important event in the story was an epic swell that hit the beaches here. Though he didn’t specifically identify it, I remember the swell the writer alluded to. It happened around 14 years ago in December. The biggest waves in decades hit our shores, well in excess of 20 feet high. We haven’t had a swell that big since then. We went down to the beach and watched, along with thousands of others. I was in awe. It was mesmerizing and astounding watching these behemoth waves pound the shore.

I thought of another event that, the first time I experienced it, was awesome. It wasn’t something unique, but it was new to me. It was when Laurie and I walked through the tunnel from the locker room onto the field at a major college football game. The stadium was packed with thousands of people. When you walk onto that field the roar of the crowd (for the team, not for us) is so powerful you can almost physically feel it. It was, literally, awesome. I share those tiny, trivial incidents because John is telling us the love of God is infinitely more powerful, more astounding, more awesome than anything else we have ever experienced.

John then tells us what that unfathomable, awe-inspiring love has done for us. “That we should be called the children of God! And that is what we are.” John says the thing that displays how overwhelming the love of God is, is that we have become his children because of it.

But doesn’t God love everyone? Aren’t all people his children? God does love everyone. It is the nature of God to love. Love drives everything he does. So when he deals with human beings, love is behind whatever he does with them. Love defines his relationship with them, and that is true of everyone. But that doesn’t make them his children. Yes, they are his creation, but not necessarily his children. Laurie and I recently got to have dinner with Nate and Melissa Smith, who made a brief visit to San Diego to take their son, Clark, on a college tour. I love Clark. I think he’s a delightful young man. I’ve always liked him. I want the best for him. If there’s anything I can do to help him I am happy to do it. I enjoy him. I really do love him. But he’s not my son. Though I love him, there is a difference between him and my own children.

My children have some of my DNA in them. Half of their DNA comes from me. Fortunately the other half of their DNA comes from Laurie, so there’s hope for them. My grandchildren also have some of my DNA in them. In their case only a quarter of their DNA comes from me. But both my children and my grandchildren literally have some of me in them. They have some of my DNA in them. In a way you could say they have some of my life in them. They makes them different than all other people. They have a unique relation to me. This is what makes the difference between God’s creation and his children. God’s children, in a sense, have his DNA in them. They have his life in them.

What did my children do to deserve becoming my children? They did absolutely nothing. That was all a result of choices and actions that Laurie and I took. It was purely because of our love that they exist and have our life in them. No matter what happens in this world, they will always have our life in them. They will always be our children and we will always love them.

Perhaps the most astounding element of God’s love is parallel to that truth. What do we do to deserve to become God’s children? Nothing. We have the right to become children of God purely because of his choices, his actions and his love for us. What makes it even more astonishing is that not only do we not deserve to be God’s children, we deserve the opposite. We deserve not to be his children. We have earned not his love, but his condemnation. Yet God loves us and has made us his children forever.

We had a recent occasion to observe a dramatic melt down by our granddaughter, Ella. It was impressive. But Laurie and I have some memories that cause us to see a bit of humor in those incidents. I recall one time when our family was on vacation when our kids were young. This event happened in Hawaii, in a parking lot of a store on the island of Kauai. Toby was several years older than Ella is now, old enough to do better, but he got into a selfish mood and essentially he threw a fit. I remember being dismayed, and not really knowing quite how to deal with it. That incident pushed me close to despair, because it was so uncalled for. I get some humor out of it now because when I see Toby having to deal with the dramatics of his own children I can just say, “You know, Mom and I have seen this before. Ha, ha, now it’s your turn.” Those incidents were not endearing, they weren’t lovely, but they never affected even slightly the fact that Toby was our son and we loved him with every part of our being.

We have some aspects of our character, we do some things that are not endearing, are not lovely to God. But they do not affect even slightly the fact that we are God’s children and he loves us with every part of his being. And he always will. He loves us because it is his nature to love, and he made it possible for us to be his children through making the greatest sacrifice on our behalf that the universe will ever see.

If we are to experience life as God intended it, it must be absolutely founded in an amazement, an astounded appreciation of the fact that God loves us with an infinite, unending love that is so vast it is unfathomable. It literally is an awesome love, because it leaves us stunned, in awe. In Ephesians 3:17-19 Paul wrote, “I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

You can see Paul doing all he can to employ human language to express the inexpressible. He wrote about how wide, long, high and deep the love of God is. He said this love surpasses knowledge. This is like what John said. God’s love is from another country. It is so alien it is astonishing. It is impossible for us to understand it because it is so vast, so unstoppable, so unconditional. There is nothing else in human experience that compares to it.

Paul wants his readers to know the love of God that surpasses knowledge. He means he wants us to experience, to live in the reality of God’s love even though we can’t truly comprehend its vastness. I do something like that all the time. For instance, I don’t really comprehend how our flat screen TV works. You can explain the physics of it, but I don’t really get it. But I can still enjoy watching a football game on the TV in all of its HD splendor, and it is awesome. I can experience it even though it surpasses my knowledge. Paul wants us to experience God’s love even though it surpasses knowledge. Maybe an even better analogy is that I don’t really understand why Laurie loves me. I never have. But that doesn’t stop me from reveling in being loved by her. And that’s how Paul wants followers of Jesus to live, reveling in God’s vast love.

That brings us to the last statement in those verses. He wants this for us so that we might be “filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” In other words, the foundation and the fountain of a life lived to the fullest is being utterly grounded and bathed in God’s love. Unfortunately most of us struggle to believe God really does love us without reservation. The problem is that if we are not convinced God loves us it will impact every single thing in our lives.

**If you are not totally convinced that God deeply loves you, everything in your life will be off**.

When God gives you a command, especially if it is one that seems difficult, risky, or even possibly painful to obey, will you obey it? You will only obey it if you are certain that God loves you. Our granddaughters had swimming lessons not too long ago. Toby brought them over to our house so they could swim in our neighborhood pool and practice what they had learned. Ella loves our pool because a large portion of it is only 3 feet deep, and she can stand up in 3 feet of water. So swimming in that is no threat because if she feels like she’s having trouble she can just stand up. But the pool does have a deep end. It’s only 5 feet, but that’s too deep for her to stand up in. At one point Toby wanted to teach her that even though it is deep, she can still swim in it and be fine as long as she practices what she’d learned. So he wanted to take her to the deep end. She said, a bit panicky, that she didn’t want to go to the 5. He had her get on his back with her hands around his neck and told her all she had to do was hold on. He would keep her safe. She wasn’t crazy about it, but she went along. Then he said he was going to duck them both under the water. Again she was nervous about it, but she held on and it was fine. Then at one point he said he was going to take her close to the edge of the pool and he wanted her to swim to the edge. She was scared. But he said, “I’ll be right here, I won’t let anything bad happen to you.” Reluctantly she did it, and was just fine. Then she said, “Can we go back to the 3 now?” I watched all this. Ella did some things she didn’t want to do, things that scared her. She was able to do it because of one fact. She knows her daddy loves her and would always take care of her. That is the fundamental truth that forms the basis of the full life. Our Father loves us, and never stops loving us. We will never be truly free to live until we believe that in the deepest part of our soul.

If we don’t believe God loves us we will never be at peace. We will always feel like we need to prove something, we need to measure up somehow. Our guilt will eat us alive. That inability to trust in God’s love will even have negative impacts on our relationships. Our thinking about our failures and our successes will be off. How we view the future will be distorted. Everything in our lives will be affected. That’s why John said it is crucial that we see how great the Father’s love is for us.

KNOW WHAT YOU WILL BE

In verse 2 John says an astounding thing. “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” We know we are God’s children. But right now most of us don’t look all that special. We also aren’t nearly as wonderful as we wish we were. But here’s the amazing thing. When Christ comes back, which he will some day, and it could be any day, we will be just like him.

He says that like it’s a good thing. I know, in church everybody knows you’re supposed to want to be like Jesus. But let’s get real here. If you randomly interviewed people and asked them if they’d like to be like Jesus, at least in this country probably the majority would say something along the lines of, “Yeah, sure, I guess so.” Now suppose you followed that up with, “On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being more than anything else in life, how much would you like to be like Jesus?” What do you think the average answer would be? If they answer honestly, I suspect it might be around a 5. Maybe. My point is that people might intellectually think that Jesus was a really good guy and being like him would be a good thing maybe, but they don’t aspire to be like him. That’s not their dream or their goal. Probably most people would rather be like a hot Hollywood personality or a famous athlete more than they want to be like Jesus.

Laurie had a conversation with Ella in which she mentioned that I would be teaching people from the Bible today. Ella asked what I was going to teach them. Laurie said I was going to talk about the fact that we are going to be like Jesus. She thought about that, then said, “I love Jesus, and I love God, but I really want to be a princess.” Now there’s an honest statement. We all are like her.

However, I submit to you that, though you might not think it’s true, being like Jesus is the best thing ever. You can see why in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44. Speaking of the time when we will be like Jesus Paul wrote, “So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.”

The body will change from perishable to imperishable. All the items that we buy in the grocery store and the pharmacy come with an expiration date. Laurie has impressive olfactory function, so when it comes to something like milk, she doesn’t really need the expiration date. She’ll open a carton of milk and know immediately that milk has gone past its useful life. But I was looking at one over the counter medicine we had in our pantry a couple of months back and noticed its expiration date was in 2018. Time to dump it.

Unfortunately, our bodies have an expiration date. One day recently I got annoyed by all the little nuisance physical issues I have. One of them is over the last couple of years the oil glands in my eyelids have had a tendency to get clogged and this causes some issues with my eyes. If I don’t deal with it my eyes start to feel like I have a bit of dust or sand or something in there. It is very uncomfortable. So I have to put a warm, wet washcloth on my eyes for a few minutes several times a week to unclog those glands. That never used to happen before. I find my skin is so thin if I practically just bump into something it cuts open. And my skin is way more dry than it used to be. Oh, and it’s starting to look like a road map with all these lines in it. I made a catalog of these annoyances, and there were a few. I realized they are like reminders that my body has an expiration date. It is wearing out, so stuff is starting to go wrong. It’s becoming like an old car that still runs, mostly, but one window doesn’t function properly, the sound system isn’t working, there are dents everywhere, the upholstery has a couple of tears in it, the engine is starting to burn oil, it doesn’t have the power it once had. That’s what Paul meant by a “perishable” body. Our bodies have an expiration date, and we live our entire lives knowing that, and as we get closer to the date, we become more and more aware of it. Jesus defeated death. His body is now an imperishable body. It is not subject to the effects of the fall, so it is not aging, slowly falling apart. It will never die. Can you imagine what it would be like to not see the visible effects of dying on your body? This is what it means to be like Jesus. We will have bodies that do not age, do not decay, and do not die. Would you like that? Well, duh. Who wouldn’t? Everyone would love that.

Paul says our bodies right now have dishonor, but will be raised in glory. The English wording makes it sound like we are dishonored, shamed people. But that’s not quite right. The word translated “dishonor” was *atimia*. The root of it was the word for honor, but the addition of the “a” on front means “not,” so it means “not honored. It not so much that we are dishonored as the fact that we are just not honored. In his book, *The Journey of Desire*, John Eldredge wrote, “We weren’t made to be ignored. And though we try to pretend that it doesn’t really matter, the collective effect of living in a world apathetic to our existence is doing damage to our souls.” When we fly on an airplane, to the airline we are just another passenger. When we go to a restaurant, we are just another customer. Something within us cries out, “But I’m *me*! I should be treated as special. The rules shouldn’t always apply to me like they do to everyone else.” But the world says we aren’t special. We don’t matter. To the world we are mostly just a number, and not a particularly important one.

But listen to what Romans 8:17 says. “Now if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” We will actually share in the glory of Christ. The book of Revelation tells us that all of creation, every being in it, will be saying of Jesus that all glory and honor and power belongs to him. We will share in it. That longing we all feel to actually be honored, will be fulfilled. That’s what it means to be like Jesus. You and I long to be honored, to know we really are special. When we are like Jesus we will feel honored the way we have always longed for. That ache will finally go away.

There’s more I could say about this, but I want to zero in on one more thing Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44. He said we right now are “natural” bodies, but we will be raised a “spiritual body.” Right now we are fallen human beings. But when we are raised we will be spiritual like Jesus. We will no longer be subject to the effects of our own fallen human nature. Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus “has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he did not sin.” Jesus is without sin. We will be spiritual like him, meaning we also will be without sin.

We will be good like Jesus. Now that at first might not seem all that wonderful, but the truth is that it is the best thing that could ever happen to us. In his book, *Inside Out*, Dr. Larry Crabb wrote, “No matter how together we may appear, even to ourself, buried deep without our heart is the vague sense that something is wrong, dreadfully wrong.” All of us feel that. We would love to be free of that sense that something is wrong, but we can’t get rid of it because something is wrong. But when we are like Jesus that will all be over. We will be free of our own foibles and failings and the guilt and disappointment we have as a result. We will be pure good, pure light, with nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to justify, nothing but that which is noble and right. What a relief it will be.

In our world people often try to make it seem like a little bit of evil is good and fun. It’s what adds excitement to our lives and to people. It makes them more interesting. And that is all a lie. By definition, evil is harmful. It hurts us and it hurts other people. Evil always does damage. To say evil doesn’t always do damage would be like saying water doesn’t always make things wet. Uh, yeah, it does, because that’s the nature of water. And doing harm is the inevitable effect of evil. Evil is like an infection in our inner being.

I recently read an article by a woman whose younger brother, Fred, is a highly regarded surgeon. She flew into his city to visit him and his family. But when he picked her up at the airport he told her he had just been called to Children’s Hospital to perform an emergency procedure. He could drop her off at his home, or she could come to the hospital and observe the surgery. Excited, and not thinking about what she was going to see, she eagerly agreed to go with him. The patient was a boy whose leg had been badly injured in a playground accident. Surgeons had treated the leg and then sent him home. Four days later the boy developed an extremely high fever, and his worried parents brought him back to the hospital. Fred determined that the wound had not been fully cleaned, that there was still some sand and gravel from the playground in it and it had gotten infected. Some of the skin had died and the infection was spreading to healthy tissue. The author says, “I was shocked at how aggressively Fred removed the stitches, reopened the wound and stuck his sterilized, gloved hand right down into the boy’s bloody leg to clean it out.” He cleaned out the area all the way down to the bone then delicately cut away the infected tissue. Then they closed up the wound.

Why do all of that? Because if it were not removed the infection would destroy all the healthy tissue and eventually kill the boy. The human problem is that we have an infection. An infection of evil. Religious people have a tendency to get hung up on particular acts of “sin.” Those are real, but they aren’t the heart of our problem. The core of it is that we are infected with evil. Imagine that someone is infected with a virus that is potentially deadly. Suppose that virus causes the person to start sneezing. Further suppose that the person focuses only on the fact that he is sneezing and cares only about stopping the sneezing. The sneezing is not the problem. The infection is the problem. Cure the virus and the sneezing will stop. But if you could somehow stop the sneezing without dealing with the virus, you have done nothing. The victim of the virus could die from it.

My point here is that we are infected by evil, all of us. The infection is making us sick. It is destroying us. To become like Jesus is to be completely healed, infection free. We will be healthier, more whole, than we have ever been, than we ever even imagined we could be.

I remember the last time I got the real flu. It was probably 13 or 14 years ago. In more than 41 years of ministry there have probably been only 2 Sundays when I missed church because I was sick. That was one of them. I had the fever, the body aches, some upper respiratory symptoms, the whole miserable deal. I often couldn’t even sleep at night because I hurt so bad. And it went on. More than a week it hung on. Even when it started getting a little better I still felt crummy. I started to think maybe I’d never get better. Maybe this was the new normal for me. It was hard to even remember what it felt like to not feel sick. I remember finally waking up one day after maybe 10 days and realizing I didn’t feel sick. What a relief it was, what a joy to just feel healthy! That’s what it will be like, to be like Jesus. We will feel healthy, good, in a way we have never felt before. I look back on that time with the flu and I shudder, thinking I never want to go through that again. Get a flu shot? Hey, if there’s even a chance that might keep me from doing that again, you bet. Where do I sign up? I never want to repeat that. And that’s what we will feel when we are like Jesus. We will remember how it felt to have the infection of evil, how we live right now, and we will shudder. But we will also rejoice, because in Jesus we will be cured forever.

I mentioned there were 3 components to full life in this passage. I’ve shown you 2, I will get to the third, the thing we need to do, in this next section.

APPLICATION

Here are some ways we can apply these truths.

GET YOUR DIVINE SHOT

Laurie and I recently got flu shots. We called and set up an appointment at CVS. At the designated time we went in and got our shots. We didn’t have to pay anything. That doesn’t mean they didn’t cost anything. Someone else covered the cost of them.

We all have an infection that has made us sick, and we all know it down deep. The great thing is that God has made a way for us to become well. It is not without cost, but God has covered the cost for us. All we need to do is get the shot that God offers. It is easier than getting a flu shot because you don’t need to make an appointment and it doesn’t hurt. Our arms were sore for a couple of days after the flu shot. God’s shot won’t make you hurt.

All you need to do is believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, ask him into your heart as your Lord and Savior. That is the cure for the infection. It means you’ll start getting better right away, and you will be completely healed some day when you are just like Jesus.

BE ROOTED IN GOD’S OTHERWORLDLY LOVE

This is crucial for all of us. I will remind you of what I said earlier. If you are not totally grounded in God’s love it will negatively impact everything in your life. It will keep you from being at peace, with yourself, with God, even with others. It will distort your view of God. It will make the world a darker, more frightening place. It will impact your thoughts, your emotions and your decisions.

Most of us have a hard time believing God really does love us. But he has made us his children, whom he delights in. View God, yourself, the circumstances of your life, other people all through the lens of God’s love.

The last of the three items I mentioned in the introduction is the next one, the last point in this application section.

PURIFY YOURSELF

Ultimately our final cure will come when we are face to face with Jesus, either through his coming here or through our going to him. But even now we should remember that every bit of infection of evil in us is not helping us, it is making us sick. John says in verse 3, “All who have this hope in him purify themselves.” It only makes sense. If you realize what it means to be like Jesus, you know what a beautiful, desirable thing that is, not only will you look forward to the final cure, you will do everything in your power to be more like Jesus right now. You will do it not to make God like you or love you, because that’s already done. You will do it because you want to be free and healthy.

Recently Laurie and I were working out together. We were following a couple on line who were doing a low impact, high intensity interval work out. I reflected on the fact that some of the movements we were doing seem silly. Actually I’m glad no one has videoed us doing it because I know I look ridiculous. On alternate days we lift weights in our garage. Once again, it looks rather futile. We are pushing dumbbells up over our heads, or doing squats, and we’re not actually accomplishing any discernible useful work. Why do we do this? Do we do it because it’s a rule we have to follow? Do we do it to impress someone or to look better? Ultimately no. We do it because we want to be healthy. We know that when it comes to our bodies the rule is move it or lose it. We go through all that because we want to be healthy.

If you want your soul to be healthy then you will do what John says. Purify yourself. Do everything you can to be more like Jesus, from the inside out, because that’s how we become more healthy.