

+ 1 John 3:18-24 + God Is Greater + 5th Sunday of Easter + 6 May 2012 +

“Actions speak louder than words.” That’s one of the most common, familiar, even overused proverbs in the English language, but isn’t it true? Time and again throughout your life and mine, throughout human history, that statement has been proven true. “Actions speak louder than words.”

Think how it plays out in your family life. Our children often prove to be very good at picking up when our actions speak louder than our words. You tell your kids to “Stop shouting!” and “Be quiet!” even as you yourself are shouting at them. Or think of the difference between simply saying “I love you” and actually showing that love by doing something that’s special for your loved one. It’s nice to hear those words, but it means even more when you show that love—a little note, a special gift, or simply taking care of a project or task that’s been left undone, as opposed to saying “I love you” while you’re being sarcastic, inconsiderate, or simply ignorant. “Actions speak louder than words.”

The Apostle John has something to say about that too. He writes, **“Little children, we must not love with word or speech, but with truth and action.”** He had just given the example of a believer who talks about the need of his brother in Christ, but never does anything about it. As God’s beloved children through faith in Christ, God wants us to show love **“with truth and action”**, but have we? Have you always shown love **“with truth”**, with honest care and concern without showing love because there’s something in it for you? Have you always shown love **“with action”**? Have your spoken care and concern shown itself with acts of love? When you say, “I love you”, have you always followed through on it?

Your conscience and mine know the answers to those questions, and it’s not pretty. Your conscience reminds you how often you have failed to love **“with truth and action”**. Have I loved the way God commands? I haven’t. Have you? You haven’t either. You and I can talk and talk and talk about love, but often it’s nothing more than mere lip service. We display a superficial love that says one thing and does the exact opposite. Have you ever said, “I love you,” but then acted like you didn’t? That’s bad enough, but what’s even worse is that we do it to our Lord! Oh, yes, I love you Lord, but then I act and live like I don’t. Isn’t such love hypocritical? How often has your love been hypocritical towards your spouse, your kids, your siblings, your neighbors, your friends, even your God? Doesn’t it make your conscience scream out against you? Mine does. You and I have been loveless so often that our consciences practically cry out for condemnation every single day, not to mention for those times when we’ve been especially loveless towards another.

When your conscience screams like that, it fills your heart with fear because you know your guilt is going to be exposed—whether that’s the hypocrisy of your love for your neighbor or your God or simply the lovelessness that comes to you and me so naturally or perhaps it’s that one loveless act that buries your heart with guilt. Your conscience and mine screams to the heavens for eternal condemnation. God commands us to love **“with action and truth”**, and yet every one of us has failed. Your conscience cries out so loudly that at times you wonder whether you still **“belong to the truth”**, whether you are nothing more than a Christian in name only, whether you can possibly stand in the soul-baring presence of the all-seeing, holy God who judges the living and the dead.

So your heart tells you your sin is too much, that God will look at you when you stand before him and turn his face away from you in disgust, that you have been loveless once too many or once too greatly, and you deserve his eternal condemnation. That rightly pierces your soul and mine with terror, because we all know how much our actions speak louder than our words.

Could it get any worse? I’m surprised none of us have sprinted for the door at this point, but look back at what the Apostle John wrote and be amazed. **“This is how we will know we belong to the truth and will convince our conscience in His presence, even if our conscience condemns us... God is greater than our conscience, and He knows all things.”** Your actions speak louder than your words, but God is even greater.

God is greater than your heart that condemns you and your conscience that screams out for justice. What about that great and awful sin of lovelessness you’ve committed? God is greater than your soul-crushing guilt, and forgives even that sin too. God is greater than your hypocritical lovelessness. He has already overcome your guilt and a whole world full of guilt with the love he showed you in his Son Jesus Christ. God is greater.

God also knows all things. He knows your sins, and yet he knows how they have been washed away with the perfect life and holy blood of Christ. **“We love, because he first loved us”**, John writes later (1 John 4:19). Jesus loved you not because you’re so lovable, but because you have not and could not love him, and he put

that love into action. He lived a life of perfect love for his family, his friends, his neighbors, even his enemies. Then, as John wrote earlier, ***“This is how we have come to know love: He laid down his life for us.”*** (1 John 3:16) All that suffering, pain and death of Christ wasn’t meant to prove something to God, but God’s way of showing you how much he loves you.

You see, that same all-knowing God, who knows your sins, also knows how he has made you his own through the cleansing, freeing waters of Holy Baptism. There in Holy Baptism, he wrapped you up in Christ’s holiness. Yes, he knows your deepest, darkest sins, yet he also knows he’s removed the guilt of those sins. Through his Word and Sacrament, God places his hand on your shoulder and tells you, “Do not be afraid. I am greater than your heart. I am greater than your guilt. My forgiveness and peace are yours. So why be afraid? See how I have loved you from eternity.” Your conscience has no reason to keep on screaming, because God is greater than your guilty heart and your condemning conscience.

The Apostle talks about that too. ***“Dear friends, if our conscience doesn’t condemn us, we have confidence before God and can receive whatever we ask from him because we keep His commands and do what is pleasing in His sight.”*** So if your conscience is quieted with God’s grace and forgiveness, you have no need to fear! Comforted by the love he showed you and continues to show with truth and action, you can actually be bold in the presence of the holy God—not arrogant, but confident. You can be confident as you come to the Lord in prayer for anyone and any matter, confident in his gracious promises to bless the faithful obedience of his children, confident that you are his and he is yours. You can enter his holy presence not as a wicked slave, but as God’s beloved child.

...So now what? If God is greater than your guilt and your fear, then what does that mean for your life now as his beloved child? John tells us, ***“Now this is His command: that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another as He commanded us.”*** Trusting in the saving name of his Son Jesus Christ, who loved you more than you can imagine, you can carry out God’s command to love one another. Comforted and confident with a quieted conscience, you can love others as Christ loved you—not merely with word and speech, but with truth and action. You can show love for your spouse with genuine care and concern. You can show love for your children and grandchildren with patience and joy. You can show love for your siblings with friendship and honesty. You can show love for your friends and neighbors by being God’s hand of blessing in their lives.

You can even show love for your enemies by showing them real concern they may not want to show you. Comforted and confident, you can keep God’s commands as his child and do what is pleasing in his sight. You can shun hypocritical love and lovelessness, and live a life of love assured that you remain in him and he in you like a grapevine and its branches so closely connected that you can’t tell where one begins and the other ends.

Now because you have a sinful nature, there will be times when you will fall back into lovelessness or hypocritical love. For good reason, your conscience will start screaming again, but when your conscience reminds you how much louder your actions speak than your words and how much you deserve God’s wrath, pay attention to what John tells us at the end of the text. ***“And the way we know that He remains in us is from the Spirit He has given us.”*** Through his Word, the Holy Spirit reminds you that Christ still remains in you, and because he is greater than your heart, you have nothing to fear.

Actions speak louder than words. How loud our consciences scream when we fail to love as much as God loves us! What fear it brings to our hearts that God will condemn us for all eternity because our guilt is so great! ...But God is greater than our guilt, and greater than our hearts that condemn us. We need not fear that guilt will overtake us and keep us from the shores of heaven, for we see the love of Christ for us in his life, death, and resurrection. Doing that, you need not fear anymore, because, dear friends, your God is greater! Amen.