

Do Actions Really Speak Louder Than Words?

The same apostle who said, “Let us not love in word or tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18), also recorded Jesus saying, “I say these things in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves” (John 17:13) and “The words that I speak to you are spirit and are life” (John 6:63).

If the “speaking” of Jesus imparts joy, and the “words” of Jesus give spiritual life, then surely such speaking is love.

It has always troubled me that 1 John 3:18 could be taken to imply that what we do with our mouths is a less real or less frequent form of love than what we do with our hands. “My little children, let us love not in word and speech, but in action and truth” (1 John 3:18). It seems to me that we have practical and biblical reasons for saying that the muscle of the tongue is more frequently the instrument of true love than any other muscle of the body.

So let’s step back and see what John is saying in 1 John 3:18 and what the wider witness of Scripture is. Notice the context, the structure of his words, and what other witnesses say.

1. The Context

The preceding verses give us a clue what John means:

“By this we know the love of God: that He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. Whoever has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, but closes his heart of compassion from him, how can the love of God remain in him?” (1 John 3:16-17).

If it comes down to your life or my life, and I take the

bullet, no demonstration of love could be greater. "Greater love has no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Then John draws out a principle of love which is more pervasive and less dramatic: "By this we know the love of God: that He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. Whoever has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, but closes his heart of compassion from him, how can the love of God remain in him?" (1 John 3:16-17). In other words, true love not only gives its life for the loved ones, but also its goods.

This is what James was saying: "If a brother or sister is naked and lacking daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' and yet you give them nothing that the body needs, what does it profit?" (James 2:15-16). This is what John is criticizing: Saying, "Be warmed, be filled," but giving no food and clothing when you have them to give.

So the first thing John has in mind is people who say they love others, but when it comes down to practical sacrifices, and acts of self-denial, they don't do them. That's what John means by loving "in word and tongue." It's not real. Deeds of sacrifice validate words of love.

2. The Structure of His Words

But there are more clues. You can't see this one in the English translation, but the contrasting pairs of words ("word and tongue" vs. "deed and truth") are not exactly parallel. The first two are dative, and the second two are objects of the repeated preposition "en." Hence literally: "Little children, let us not love by word or by tongue but in deed and in truth." The difference may be incidental. Or perhaps there is a reason for it: "Let us not think of love as actions of instruments like tongues and the sounds they make (words).

Let us rather think of love as a reality that is happening in our deeds and in truth."

In other words, love can never be reduced to sounds (words) or muscle movements (whether the tongue or any other muscle). Rather love is always something real within and beneath those actions. Something true. That's why Paul said, "If I give all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profits me nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3). Deeds by themselves are never love. Never. Love is "in" the deeds. So John's point is: Don't identify love with words or tongue-acts. Love is deeper. It is active in muscle actions, but is never identical with such instruments. The words, "in truth," push the issue deeper.

But even more important than the grammar is the surprising contrast between "tongue" and "truth." "Little children, let us not love by word or tongue but in deed and in truth." We expect the contrast between "word" and "deed." But not "tongue" and "truth." We might have expected something like "not by tongue but by hand."

The simplest lesson to draw from this is: Don't make loving promises with your tongue that don't come true in reality. If you say you are going to come to help, come. The promise is encouraging, and therefore loving. But all that encouragement dies when you don't show up. Tell the truth. Love in truth.

A second lesson to draw from the contrast between tongue and truth is that truth itself is a wonderful gift. "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (John 8:32). Speaking the truth to someone, whether they like it or not, is a great gift. "The words that I speak to you are ... life" (John 6:63). That was true for Jesus, and for the apostles: "Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life" (Acts 5:20).

Which means that when the tongue and its sounds (words) are

“in truth” they become acts of love. The line of lovelessness is not drawn between speaking and doing, but between speaking and doing in the truth, and speaking and doing in emptiness. Truth turns word-love into deed-love.

Which leads us now to ...

3. What Other Witnesses Say

The concern I raised at the beginning was that 1 John 3:18 could be taken to imply that what we do with our mouths is a less real or less frequent form of love than what we do with our hands and feet. I don't think John was saying that. Here is how real and frequent and important mouth-love is.

With the mouth everlasting joy is imparted.

“But now I am coming to You, and I say these things in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves” (John 17:13).

By the mouth faith is awakened.

“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17).

With the mouth courage imparts profitable things.

“I did not keep from declaring what was beneficial to you, and teaching you publicly and from house to house” (Acts 20:20)

With the mouth blessing comes.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless, and do not curse” (Rom. 12:14).

With the mouth grace is given.

“Let no unwholesome word proceed out of your mouth, but only that which is good for building up, that it may give grace to the listeners” (Eph. 4:29).

We will be judged according to our mouth-deeds as much as by our hand-deeds.

“But I say to you that for every idle word that men speak, they will give an account on the Day of Judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt. 12:36–37).

Two Ways to Get It Wrong

When John says, “Little children, let us not love in word or tongue but in deed and in truth,” he does not diminish the reality or frequency or importance of loving with our words. In fact, even though the most dramatic and decisive expression of love may be the deep sacrifices we make for those we love, two things remain true.

The need to love in deed does not diminish the importance of loving with our words.

One is that there are sacrifices which have ulterior motives and are not real love (“Though I give my body to be burned ...”). Love is not identical to deeds. Ever. It is always “in” the deeds, or not.

The other is: “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34). Therefore, the most frequent witness to the love of our hearts is what comes out of our mouths. In this sense our words are deeds. And God knows when they are true.

But let us never treat the mouth-deed or the hand-deed with

neglect, or preference. Many fail as lovers by thinking they can replace words with deeds. And many fail, thinking words are enough. Rather let us always think: Both! Both word and work! Mouth-work and hand-work! Both!

“And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Col. 3:17).

“For I will not dare to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, to make the Gentiles obedient, by word and deed” (Rom. 15:18).

“Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God our Father ... comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work” (2 Thess. 2:16–17).

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