

Greater Love

(Sermon Notes) By Warren Zehrung 11/7/2015

There is a concept in the Scriptures that is not generally understood very well. It is the concept of **Laying down your life**. What does it mean to lay down our lives? What does it mean to lay down our life **for others**?

In today's sermon we are going to examine this Biblical phrase – **lay down your life** – and try to see what it means for the People of God. We all understand very well that Jesus **laid down His life** for us.

But, what is not very well understood by many of the scattered Church brethren, is that we are absolutely required by God to do the same thing; lay down our lives. Brethren, how many of us understand the undeniable Godly requirement that we too, must also lay our lives down.

Imprecise translations, like the King James Version of 1 John 3:16, do not define the seriousness of the matter very well.

1John 3:16 Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down his life for us: and we **ought** to lay down our lives for the brethren.

Where I come from, '**ought**,' is not a very strong command. It was used more as an '**optional suggestion**,' like if my mom had told me as a teenager: "You **ought** to wear a jacket today because it might get chilly." If I was going outside to play football, I knew that I would be running and getting hot, and would not need a jacket. So, I was not being disobedient to go without my jacket. The phrase in 1John 3:16, '**ought to**,' almost makes this commandment seem like a **good idea** that is an **optional suggestion**. It meant something like, "It would be nice if you could see your way clear to lay down your life for the brethren."

The truth is that Jesus Christ laid down His life and **we MUST** do the same.

It is absolutely required of us as Christians that we **lay down our lives**. This concept of **laying down our lives** is a **most** important matter. A better translation of 1 John 3:16 would be:

1 John 3:16 Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down His life for us: and we **must** lay down our lives for the brethren.

After we grasp the **compulsory** nature of laying down our lives for each other, we need to know what God expects of us.

After all, we do not see any Christians dying as Christ did. So what does laying down our life mean? This notion was not emphasized in the Worldwide Church of God, but it should have been, because it is absolutely **required** of Christians. It is not a suggestion, nor is it flowery semantics; it is a salvational requirement for Christians.

God the Father and Jesus Christ – both gave us that example:

John 3:16 For God the Father so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son.

God the Father made the inestimable **sacrifice** of being willing to give up His only Son forever; while Jesus **sacrificed** His life for us. I emphasize here, that **laying down our lives** is a matter of **self-sacrifice**.

Those who are in the world cannot comprehend **our part** in the sacrifices of God the Father and Jesus Christ, but we are an integral part of those sacrifices. The thought is all too remote for them to fathom.

So, when we read John 3:16, let's understand to whatever degree that we are able, the magnitude of the **sacrifice** that God the Father and Jesus Christ were willing to make for us. Are we then able to **lay our lives down** as Christ gave us example?

The apostle Paul poses a question designed to make us think. "If you knew that someone was absolutely innocent of a charge for which he had been sentenced to the death penalty, would you **take his place** and die in his stead?" Would you be willing to die a martyr's death if need be?

Romans 5:7 For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet perhaps for a **good man** some would even **dare to die**.

What Paul is giving us here is the physical example that we are able to relate to – so that we can go on to the **higher spiritual** meaning of **laying down our lives**. We are all familiar with stories of how a soldier might throw himself on a hand grenade to save a fellow soldier. For that act of valor he posthumously receives the Metal of Honor. There is no greater sacrifice or **act of love** than to lay your life down for another. And of course, Paul is telling us that is what Jesus Christ did for us. He died for us that we might live. Let me relate a recent incident where men laid their lives down in a very real way.

When radical Islamic militants attacked the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya, four Americans died. U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and U.S. Foreign Service Information Management Officer Sean Smith died in the initial onslaught. A group of more Americans, led by senior security operative Tyrone S. Woods, decided to take it upon themselves to mount a rescue attempt. The top CIA officer in Benghazi ordered them to "stand down," but they felt compelled to go into harm's way to try to rescue their fellow servicemen; not willing to leave any behind. Hours later, Tyrone S. Woods and Glen Doherty, both former Navy SEALs, were killed by enemy mortar rounds. It was said of them:

"As Americans, let us never, ever forget that our freedom is only sustained because there are people who are willing to fight for it, to stand up for it, and in some cases, **lay down their lives** for it."

As we can readily see, Laying down your life is a very real concept. We find that the apostle Peter possessed a similar love for His Lord:

John 13:37 Peter said unto Him, Lord, why cannot I follow thee now? I will **lay down my life** for thy sake.

Jesus knew that Peter was not up to it yet!

John 13:38 Jesus answered him, Wilt thou **lay down thy life** for my sake? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, The cock shall not crow, till thou hast denied me thrice.

The question brethren, is: Are we laying our lives down for Christ sake? That phrase, **lay down my life**, is one that Peter had heard Jesus repeat many times. The **title** of this sermon comes from this verse where Jesus said:

John 15:13 **Greater love** hath no man than this, that a man **lay down his life** for his friends.

Please notice here that Jesus ties these two concepts together – **Godly love** and **self-sacrifice**.

John 15:13 **Greater love** hath no man than this, that a man **lay down his life** for his friends.

Self-sacrifice for others is an act of **Godly love**.

This "**Greater love**" mentioned here can be described as "**outgoing concern for others**." But Godly Love goes even further than that. Not only is it "Outgoing Concern for another,"...

It is "Outgoing Concern for another **with a great personal cost to us**." Let me repeat that most important definition:

Godly love manifests itself as self-sacrifice in outgoing concern for others with a **great personal cost to us**. A cost that Jesus often describes as “Laying down our lives” for another.

That is the “Love” that Jesus Christ is speaking of. We are not talking about sentimental gibberish here. When Jesus said, “I Love You,” He was saying, **I’m dying** for you so that you **may live**.”

John 13:34 A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; **as I have loved you**, that ye also love one another.

Let look at a few places where Jesus **spoke** these words and described giving up His life. Brethren, it is incumbent upon us to grasp the significance and meaning of Christ’s words.

John 10:11 I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd **gives his life** for the sheep.

John 10:14 I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and **I am known** of mine.

That means that true Christians **know** Jesus Christ.

John 10:15 As the Father knows me, even so know I the Father: and **I lay down my life** for the sheep.

John 10:17 Therefore doth my Father love me, because **I lay down my life**, that I might take it again.

John 10:18 No man takes it from me, but **I lay it down** of myself. I have power to **lay it down**, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.

To be true Philadelphians, we must display "brotherly love" and there is no **greater love** that we can show than by laying down our lives for one another.

Why and how is laying down our life the greatest love possible? How do we go about laying down our lives over and over as Jesus intends? In today’s sermon we will examine the ways we are to be **living sacrifices**, because that is what is required of Christians. Paul called our way of laying down our life, “living sacrifices.”

Romans 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a **living sacrifice**, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

What is this reasonable service?

The answer is to risk your friends, your home, your land, your social status, your job, and even your **life** itself to restore our wayward brethren to the path which leads to eternal life. Laying our lives down is self-sacrifice.

Jesus loved life and living as much as any man ever did. He did not want to die, but He was willing to do so for a purpose.

Matthew 26:39 And [Jesus] went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, **let this cup pass from me**: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.

Jesus’ humanity speaks out, “Father, is there some other way to accomplish your will?” Jesus torture was extreme, but **not** as horrendous as the specter of the eminent death He faced.

Matthew 26:42 He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, your will be done.

Jesus was willing to **sacrifice** Himself by **laying down His life** because it was God’s will.

Hebrews 9:26 For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the **sacrifice of himself**.

We are told more specifically in the Book of Ephesians that **we too** are to **sacrifice** ourselves. We are to be self-sacrificing. And therein we find the meaning for us today of **laying down our lives**.

We are to be self-sacrificing.

Ephesians 5:1 Be ye therefore **followers of God**, as dear children;

A moment ago we saw that God the Father and Jesus both made supreme sacrifices for us. We are told here to **follow their example**.

Ephesians 5:2 And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a **sacrifice** to God for a sweet smelling savor.

As Christians, we are no longer our own – we have been developing that thought recently. We belong to God – not to ourselves. James expressed it clearly.

James 1:1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But 'servant' here is the Greek word '*doulos*' which means a bound slave. When James described his relationship to the Father and Jesus, he was saying that he no longer followed **his own** dictates but those of God. James was a living sacrifice in that his every waking moment was given in sacrifice to God. James sought to serve God by serving others – and not serve himself.

Let me give you an anecdotal example: Have you ever been with a group of people who were trying to decide something like – where are we all going to eat? And it seems that often there is a prominent personality in any group who is willing to declare, "I wouldn't eat there if it was the last place on earth." What happens is that everyone else ends up eating where that one person wants to eat.

James is saying that he willingly **forgoes the self** – in order to do the will of God. James lived – not for himself, but to promote and advance the spiritual welfare of others. That is an act of **Godly love** and an example of **laying down his life**. Being selfless in that way results in God's **Will** being done. It also results in Godly **blessings**. Service to others is Godliness – it is **Godly love**.

Romans 5:8 But God commended his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Jesus shows us **how** it is that He cares for us. During the foot-washing Jesus laid down the principles for laying down our lives as servants to one another.

John 13:16 Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him.

Jesus was God in the flesh – yet He lowered Himself to the status of the lowest servant. Jesus washed the apostles' feet – just as He washes away our sins. What is the spiritual reality of this ceremony? The dirt on the feet represents a spiritual problem in the life of a converted person.

The foot-washing teaches us that we are responsible for intervening in our **neighbor's** situation to help him overcome his spiritual problem. Jesus did not teach us to pray, "My Father," but, "Our Father," because we are our brother's keeper; Helping him or her into the Kingdom of God. We are to serve and make sacrifices for one another. This is what "laying down our life" entails. We must involve ourselves, even at great personal risk.

John 13:8 ... Jesus answered [Peter], If I wash thee not, thou hast **no part with me**.

And Jesus stipulates that we too must be a part of the process of helping each other into the Kingdom.

John 13:17 If ye know these things, happy are ye **if ye do** them.

Matthew 20:28 Even as the Son of man came not to **be served**, but to serve, and to **give his life** a ransom for many.

John 13:34 A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; **as** I have loved you, that ye also love one another.

This question of **laying** our lives down for one another in Christian love and concern is a major **salvational** issue. Before we were called by God, we were **dead**; as good as dead in our sins. But Jesus loved us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8). We can do **no less** – we must love our brothers in Christ – and we must sacrifice and lay our lives down for him, also.

1 John 3:14 “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that **loves not** his brother abides in death.”

“He that **loves not** his brother;” that means that he is not laying his life down, nor is he sacrificing for his brother at great personal cost. If he is not doing that he “abides in death.”

This “love” is coming to the spiritual aid of anyone and everyone in God’s Church. If we do not love our brother, if we do not provoke him to good works, we abide in death.

This love is Godly care. It is not mere sentiment. These are such soft words, but so strong; they are salvational. Those who refuse to lay down their lives, lack spiritual discernment. It is a great virtue to come to the rescue of a brother or sister who is spiritually in jeopardy.

We are **not** laying down our lives for the brethren if we do not reconcile, if we do not come to their aid, if we do not open our hearts and minds to them, if we do not share our deepest concerns with them, or when we do not provoke them to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24).

Being open and involved with others is difficult at first because it makes us vulnerable. We may face a kind of personal crucifixion because we choose to be a friend and a neighbor to those in spiritually difficult situations. Even those in our own circle of acquaintances may ostracize us. Laying down our lives in a Godly way will bring about costly ramifications. It is not easy – it is a difficult road that we are on. It is for this very reason that we have been called by God; to do the same thing that Jesus did!

“Jesus Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow his steps.” (1 Peter 2:21)

Not only must we have an attitude of being willing to lay our life down for others, we must actively intervene. Jesus said:

John 13:15 For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.

Jesus says to us in John 15:12, “This I command you, that you love one another **as** I have loved you.” Jesus is commanding us to love one another in **just the same way as** He loved us. And He **sacrificed** Himself for us!

You do not actually have to die.

Paul explained that when you were **laying your life down** it was a sacrifice – but a sacrifice in which **you did not actually have to die** – but stay alive to sacrifice yourself many times in this Christian life.

Jesus laid His life down for us, so we must lay our lives down for others - but how do we do that? It is only with God's help and the power of His Spirit that we are able to renew our mind, patiently endure the trials of this life, and live as Christians must by laying down our lives for one another.

When a brother or sister has strayed and allowed a serious sin to enter into their life - we must serve them by going to their spiritual rescue, no matter what it takes - that is laying down our life for them.

1 Peter 4:13 But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are **partakers of Christ's sufferings**; that, when His glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.

How many of us have the attitude of Paul? When facing martyrdom and death he said.

Acts 20:24 But none of these things move me, **neither count I my life dear** unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy.

Examples of laying our lives down:

We're admonished to "love one another," to "build up one another."

To encourage and build up one another. To admonish one another. To give time courtesies to others. To pray for others. To write, call or visit others – especially the sick and elderly. To serve one another. To fast for another one of the brethren. To bear one another's burdens. To comfort one another and offer condolences in their loss.

Romans 16:3 Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus:

Romans 16:4 Who have for my **life laid down their own necks**: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.

Romans 16:5 Likewise greet the church that is in their house.

1 Corinthians 6:7 Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not **rather take wrong**? Why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?

Suffer loss for the sake of peace in the Church. 'Taking wrong,' or 'blame me' for the sake of peace are examples of **laying down our lives**. 'Holding our tongue,' for the purpose of not causing offense is another example.

Even when we are correct, we do not argue the point. Notice Jesus Christ's example:

1Peter 2:23 Who, when He was reviled, reviled not again.

Another example:

Going out of our way **not to cause offense** is a way of **laying down our life**.

1 Corinthians 8:9 Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak.

Another example:

When the Joe Tkach administration determined to abandon the fundamental doctrines and beliefs of God's Church – there were those brethren who took a stand. They were in fact **laying down their lives** when they **boldly** stood for God's Truth. It meant being fired, disfellowshipped and for many the worst part was being cut-off from other brethren who had become like family to them. Church families became separated by ministers who determined that what they were doing was more important than what **God** was doing.

But for those who took a stand against the false teachers, they could **not in good conscience** quietly go along with the apostasy, and thereby **send** the signal to everyone that they were going along with the heresy, when they were not. It cost them dearly, those who were **laying down their lives**, but hopefully, their sacrifice helped others to wake up to the travesty that was unfolding.

There were many who chose to stay with the 'powers that be' and not rock the boat. They thought that nothing could ever happen to "**Headquarters**." They did not know their Bible. The same thing happened when Israel looked to the physical Temple instead of to God. Their sins caught up with them and the Temple was destroyed. Their trust was in the wrong place.

Jeremiah 7:4 Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The Temple of the LORD, The Temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these.

Jeremiah 7:12 But go ye now unto my place which was in Shiloh, where I set my name at the first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel.

God allowed the Temple to be toppled. The same thing happened at Pasadena to the world headquarters of what was once the church offices. Paul would have said to them:

Romans 12:3 For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, **not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think.**

Brethren, there is a time to take a stand – do not let it pass! There are some brethren – members and ministers alike – who have not found cause to rock the boat in their organizations. It really bothers me when I find members being gravely mistreated by the ministry.

So far, everything is okay – they have been able to put up with the doctrinal changes, political intrigue, substitutions for pure religion, and the way honorable members have been mistreated. Their personal policy is to “play it safe – and keep their nose clean.”

A person, who will **not** get involved in an uncertain situation to salvage a brother who is sinning is putting his **salvation** in jeopardy. The most important time to **lay your life down** is when it is required to help a brother or sister into God’s Kingdom.

Galatians 6:1 Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, [no matter who it is] ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness.

We do that out of love, because we do not want them to miss out on the Kingdom of God. It does not matter what others think of your actions – you have a responsibility to your brother. If you refuse to step in – you have not loved your brother. An individual like that, “cops out” by saying, “I’ll put it in God’s hands,” which is their justification to **avoid** fulfilling their Christian duty. That is simply, “passing the buck, and justifying the self, at the same time.”

Matthew 27:23 And the governor [Pilate] said, Why, what evil hath [Jesus] done? But they cried out the more, saying, Let him be crucified.

Matthew 27:24 When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and **washed his hands** before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it.

But, brethren, we know that washing his hands of the matter did not excuse Pilate. In fact, this is where we get the derogatory phrase, “Washing your hands of the matter.” It is not that easy to divest ourselves of our responsibility. Pilate missed his opportunity for righteousness. The principle is found in Leviticus 5:1. It says:

“When someone sins in any of these ways: If he has seen, heard, or even **known** about something sinful in any way at all, and does not respond to rectify the situation, he is held by God to be personally responsible for the iniquity.”

When God has allowed us to be aware of an offense, it is because He expects us to become involved in remedying the wrongdoing. Yes, that is **laying down your life**, because that can get you into big trouble with the powers that be – with headquarters, with the ministry, with the authorities, with the establishment.

Brethren, is there a process of self-sacrifice or self-denial each day in our lives? Do we sacrifice our time, our energy, our reputation, our standing or position among those who seem to be pillars?

The carnal self desires to serve **its needs**, wants, and life - **rather** than what my brother needs, what my brother thinks, what God says in His Word.

When things are not what they should be at Church; – there is some injustice or abuse – whether by the minister or the brethren – we are not permitted by God to simply close our eyes to the wrongdoing. It is not optional – we must become involved – even at the **off chance** or possibility that we ourselves will be ostracized or disfellowshipped.

Do not make the mistake of saying, “I’ll put it in God’s hands.” Our future is to reign and rule with Christ in the millennium as His helpmates (Revelation 5:10). What kind of helpmate would we be if we always deferred every problem back to Christ to take care of?

Now is the time for us to prove our willingness to put ourselves in harm’s way in order to turn a brother around as it says in James 5:20. James gives us a perfect example of the spiritual application of the foot-washing.

James 5:19-20 Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him [turns him around], Let him know, that he which converts [turns him around] the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from [eternal] death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.”

James tells us how we are to go to the rescue of every brother or sister in Christ who is experiencing a spiritual problem. This is the epitome of Christian love.

We are to lay our life down for the brethren – even if it means going against the tide of popular opinion – even if it means going against the lackadaisical methods of many brethren in the Church, and risk being ostracized.

This is what **laying our life down** is all about. It would not do in the millennium to insist on putting everything into Christ’s hands. What will happen to those who have not taken a stand or put their own wellbeing in harm’s way to save a brother from ruin? **Laying down our life as a living sacrifice** is a prerequisite to being in the Kingdom.

Those who are not willing to spiritually lay their life down as living sacrifices – now – will have the opportunity to lay their life down – physically – in the tribulation.

If nothing has been enough of a concern for us to stand up and be counted – laying it all on the line, as Christ gave us example, we should question whether we are awake or asleep. There is a strong tendency in human nature to put the **self** first. We tend to look out for ourselves – take care of our own needs – even feather our own nest.

Laying our lives down is not **a once in a lifetime** occurrence – it must be going on **daily**. Just like the multiple daily sacrifices of the Old Testament.

We must be **laying our lives down** constantly – **making many daily sacrifices**, with prayers, kind words of encouragement, help, ... fasting sometimes for another...

Paul gives examples of his **laying his life down** by the grace of God. By the grace of God, **we too**, have the opportunity to lay our lives down daily.

2 Corinthians 6:4 But in all things approving ourselves as the servants of God, in much **patience**, in **afflictions**, in **necessities**, in **distresses**,

2 Corinthians 6:5 In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings, in fastings;

2 Corinthians 6:6 By pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by love unfeigned,

2 Corinthians 6:7 By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left,

Paul is battled; on every side he has to stand for righteousness.

2 Corinthians 6:8 By honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and **yet true**; [never in sin]

2 Corinthians 6:9 As unknown, and yet well known; **as dying, and, behold, we live**; as chastened, and not killed;

2 Corinthians 6:10 As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; [we share the rich truth of God] as having nothing, and yet possessing all things. [eternal life]

What a record of self-sacrifice and laying down his life to present to Jesus Christ! Whether or not we are **laying down our lives** is not a matter of opinion. It is a **way of life** that we must live by.

As we grow in the practice of self-sacrifice – we learn to be merciful of others. We learn to be forgiving of others. These are the spiritual qualities of Jesus Christ.

When we are Christ-like, we suffer for others.

1 Peter 2:5 you, brethren, also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to **offer up spiritual sacrifices** acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Here is another example of **laying your life down** – make your boss' way work. Help others to achieve their goals.

1 Peter 2:18 Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh.

1 Peter 2:19 For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. [**laying your life down**]

1 Peter 2:20 For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God.

1 Peter 2:21 For to **this you were called**, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

We are to lay down our lives for others following the example of Christ laying down His life for us. To be true Philadelphians we must express "brotherly love" and there is no **greater love** that we can show than by **laying down our lives** for one another.

End: Greater Love