

The Distinguishing Mark of Discipleship

John 13:34-35

As many of you know, the Ratliffs own the largest Sheltie in North America. We thought we were getting a lap dog (in the 15 lb. range), but Molly kept growing and growing. She's leveled out at about 50 lbs. Nevertheless, we love Molly more than I ever thought possible. You pet owners understand how this happens. Molly has a couple of bad habits, but she's a phenomenal addition to our family.

Something I've often pondered is how much easier it is to have a good relationship with my dog than with other people. For starters, my relationship with Molly "works" because she does what I want her to do; I'm the master and she's the dog. When I want to play with her, we play; when I want her to leave me alone, I just have her to go sit in the corner. It's a pretty sweet arrangement really. Another great thing about Molly is that she doesn't hold grudges. If you accidentally step on her, she yelps and jumps back and then wants you to pet her. As far as I can tell she doesn't hold grudges (she "doesn't take into account a wrong suffered"). I could go on and on, but you get the picture. I feel better about my relationship with Molly than just about anybody else in the world.

By contrast, relationships with other people are incredibly complicated and often messy. People *don't* always do what you want them to do (you've probably noticed that). Even when you know what's best for the other person, they often want to do something else. And people *do* hold grudges. We disappoint and offend each other. Over time we begin to resent each other; we talk bad about each other; we withdraw from each other. Human relationships are sometimes so difficult and painful that they are terminated; we sometimes conclude that it's actually better not to be in relationship with another person – it's simply not worth it.

I'm describing the human condition in general, but I'm also describing what sometimes happens among believers. Relationships within the body of Christ aren't always easy. We usually have higher expectations of believers than others; when we disappoint and offend each other it's doubly painful. Some believers have even concluded that relationships within the church aren't worth the effort. And so some keep their distance or withdraw altogether.

Today we are going to look at a passage from John 13 that challenges all of us to a deeper commitment to relationships in the body of Christ than we ever imagined. Jesus is actually going to tell His disciples that they should love each other just as He has loved them. That may sound very unreasonable to some of us, but nobody can accuse Jesus of not understanding the difficulty of human relationships.

With this in mind, let's consider John 13:31-35. We'll focus our attention on verses 34 and 35, but let's first pick up the context in verses 31-33. Jesus is referring to His impending death and resurrection when He speaks of being "glorified."

31 Therefore when he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him;

Both Jesus and God the Father would soon be glorified through Jesus' death and resurrection. J.I. Packer gives a helpful illustration of what it means to "glorify" someone else. It is like a

spotlight that is trained upon an impressive building. The spotlight glorifies the building; it exposes just how impressive it is. The spotlight doesn't draw attention to itself; it draws attention to the building. For example, when you drive past the K-State Alumni Center at night, you don't think, "Wow, those are amazing spotlights!" No, you think, "For Manhattan, Kansas, that's an impressive building." The lights glorify the building. The light show just how impressive the building is.

In a similar way, the Father glorifies the Son ("the Son of Man *is glorified*"). The Father shines the light on Jesus so that people see just how impressive He is. The irony, of course, is that nobody in Jesus' day associated the shame and humiliation of the cross with glory; nobody considered it a demonstration of anything impressive or weighty. But when Jesus was crucified, His compassion and love were on display in a way that the world had never seen. The sky was darkened and the earth shook as an expression of the fierceness of Jesus' love for us; He was willing to bear the wrath of God that we deserved. People like the centurion concluded, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54)

As well, "God is glorified in Him/Jesus." When Jesus was crucified, He was shining the light on the Father as well. People could see the Father's love and justice at the cross. God's justice demanded that sin be paid for (it couldn't merely be ignored). But God's love compelled Him to send His one and only Son as payment for our sin (John 3:16). The spotlight on the Father's love and justice was never brighter than when it shone on Jesus on the cross. Verse 32 adds:

32 if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately.

The fact that God would glorify the Son "immediately" suggests that Jesus is talking about His impending death and resurrection. Beyond being glorified at the cross, Jesus would be glorified by being exalted to the right hand of the Father.

33 "Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'

Just as Jesus had told His adversaries that they would soon be unable to find Him (see John 7:33-34), Jesus tells His disciples that He is going to a place they cannot come. Again, this is a reference to His death, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of the Father. Peter will ask a follow-up question about where Jesus might be going that they cannot come (verse 36). But what is fascinating is what Jesus says next. In His "absence" there is one primary thing, one distinguishing mark, that will prove to people that they are His disciples.

34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

When they were physically "with" Jesus, it was obvious that they were His disciples/apprentices. They followed Him wherever He went; they soaked in His teaching; they did the things that He told them to do. While Jesus was with them, they were easily identified as Jesus' disciples. But when Jesus left them and went to a place they couldn't yet follow, how could people tell whether they were still apprenticed to Jesus, learning how to live the life that He lived? The simple

answer was that when people saw them loving each other the same way that Jesus had loved them, people would know that they were His disciples.

It turns out that it's not only our doctrine – as important as it is – that marks us as disciples of Jesus. It's not our church attendance. It's not our lifestyle in some abstract sense. In a very tangible way people can tell whether or not we are followers of Christ by whether or not we love one another as Christ loved us. Jesus is saying something that should stop us in our tracks. We can have all of our doctrinal i's dotted and t's crossed; we can be involved up to our eyeballs in church stuff; but if we don't love one another, we aren't really His disciples. We may be a lot of other things, but we aren't really following Christ.

This is a consistent theme in the NT. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13 that you can have all knowledge and every spiritual gift . . . you can even make incredible sacrifices, but without love it “profits you nothing”; those things have no value in and of themselves. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 1:5, “But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” John wrote this in 1 John 4:20-21:

20 If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

The point is hard to miss, isn't it. Look at verse 34 again:

34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

This commandment was “new” in the sense that Jesus commanded them to love each other in a deeper and more comprehensive than every before. His love for them was now the standard of their love for each other. If they wanted to know how they should love each other, they'd have to slow down and ponder how Jesus had loved them. Of course, how He loved *them* is how He loves *us* too. If we stick close to our passage at hand, we see that Jesus loved His disciples in some very tangible ways that are easily applicable to us.

For example, in **John 13:1-11** we have the account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Jesus broke protocol by washing His disciples' feet, but their feet were dirty and needed washing. Jesus' challenge to them was, “If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet . . . a slave is not greater than his master.”

And so, if we love each other like Christ loved His disciples, we too will serve each other – even when we don't have to. We won't be overly concerned about status and protocol and making sure we're not serving more than the next guy . . . We'll be predisposed to notice needs and seek to address them. I'd simply have you consider whether or not it is your habit to notice needs and seek to address them.

Some of you are phenomenal at this. You're just like Jesus walking into the Upper Room and realizing that nobody has picked up the towel and basin; you very naturally, habitually notice needs and seek to meet them. Perhaps others of you would have to say, “Quite honestly I'm not

serving right now. All my time and energy is focused on ‘me and mine.’” There are seasons of life when that focus is necessary, but in general our lives should be focused outward. You may need to intentionally seek out ways to serve others in the body of Christ. Here at Faith there are many different ways to serve in the ongoing ministries of the church, depending on your giftedness and interests.

Consider another example. In **John 13:36-38** we have Peter’s confident pronouncement, “Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for You.” Jesus replied, “Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times.” Jesus spoke the truth (Peter wasn’t nearly as brave as he thought he was). But Jesus spoke the truth in love. As a matter of fact, in the parallel account in Luke 22 Jesus mentions to Peter that Satan had demanded permission to “sift” Peter like wheat but that Jesus had prayed for him, that he would return and strengthen his brothers. In other words, Jesus was “for” Peter even though Peter would deny Him! Jesus saw beyond Peter’s sin; Jesus had a vision for Peter as a valuable member of His church. If we are disciples, we’ll let Jesus teach us how to love people this same way.

Chances are that you don’t have to think too long and hard to identify a time when someone in the body of Christ let you down and disappointed you. When that happened, how did you respond? The tendency is to write the other person off and say, “Fine, if that’s the way you treat me, that’s the way I’ll treat you!” That may make sense in the world, but not in the church! That’s not how Jesus loved Peter. That’s not how Jesus has loves us. Jesus looks past our sin and sees what we might become in Him. We too need to do the same.

This is where the rubber meets the road. We have to ask ourselves honestly, “Do I want to be Christlike or not? Do I want to learn from Jesus how to love others the way He loves me? Or do I just pay lip service to the idea of being a disciple of Christ?” Again, a disciple is a learner, an apprentice, of Jesus. On the one hand, learning to forgive people, be patient with people, pray for people, trust God to change people, not give up on people, etc. will be incredibly demanding and (sometimes) exhausting. On the other hand, Jesus is only asking us to love others the way He loves us. Jesus is giving us the privilege of having the same impact in *their* lives that He has had in *our* lives. This isn’t some type of joyless duty – loving others the way Christ loved us. No, this is the heart of the Christian life. We love because He loved us.

Can you think of a relationship in the body of Christ in which you need to love the other person the way Jesus has loved you? If so, be full of faith that God will give you everything you need to love that person well.

Let me return our attention to verse 35. The humbling reality is that *others can legitimately evaluate our discipleship by whether or not we love each other as Jesus has loved us.*

35 "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Jesus is saying that our relationships with each other are the foundation of our influence on those outside the body of Christ. He is saying that people can look at the way we treat each other and conclude, “Those people are disciples of Jesus,” or “Those people are religious, but they sure aren’t disciples of Jesus.”

The implications for us are absolutely staggering. This means that our love for each other should be so palpable and tangible that others conclude that we're the real deal. Not everybody will want the life we have, but some (at least) should be drawn to Jesus because our life together is so compelling. This means that our love for each other is the foundation of our influence in this world.

The Barna Group did research among 16 to 29 year-old Americans who are outside the Christian faith. They wanted to learn what outsiders really think "evangelical Christians." One of the most insightful things that surfaced was the one quarter of the people surveyed were of the opinion that modern Christians are simply not living the life that Jesus lived and taught. In other words, they believe that church people are "unchristian." It's not so much that they reject Jesus Christ; rather, they see no reason to be associated with people who aren't really following Christ.

That being the case, what should do? What should be our response? Well, we don't need to hire a PR firm to improve our image and convince the world that we're really great people after all. No, the main thing we should do is pursue Christlikeness. To be honest this fills me with hope because by the grace of God we can become like Christ. God Himself is committed to conforming us to the image of Christ. And so the best thing we can do is humbly seek to be like Jesus Christ – especially when it comes to loving each other. Because when we love each other the way Jesus has loved us, all will know that we belong to Christ.