

## ***The Heart of a Disciple: Loving One Another***

*John 13:34-35*

Last Summer I officiated a wedding in Kansas City. Of course we had a rehearsal and rehearsal dinner the night before. After the dinner everyone present was invited to share thoughts and memories of the couple. You're always taking a risk when you invite people to share in those situations. Sometimes people share touching memories and encouraging thoughts; but other times they share inappropriate stories from childhood or college and all sorts of cringeworthy thoughts. When one of the groomsmen stood up and launched into his comments I wasn't sure which way it was going to go.

I wish I had a video of what he said, but here's my best shot at what Jesse said:

*Micah, tomorrow afternoon you're going to be standing in front of the crowd waiting for McKenna to walk down the aisle. When the doors open and you see her, you're going to be overwhelmed by her beauty. You're going to be filled with emotion and affection and love for her.*

*. . . Micah, you need to remember that that's exactly how Jesus feels about you. . . .*

He went on to talk about the love of Jesus. His comments were so very powerful and profound for several reasons. For starters, the church is called "the bride of Christ." And in Ephesians 5 Paul wrote, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church." Jesse wanted Micah to know Christ's love for him. If he didn't know experientially the unique, fierce love of Jesus, there's no way he could love McKenna as Christ loved the church.

Today we are going to consider Jesus' command, "Love one another, just as I have loved you" (John 13:34). There is no way that you and I can love each other that way unless we are experiencing the unique, fierce love of Christ in tangible ways. His love for us is what informs and fuels our love for one another. That's what we're going to talk about today.

During our 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting we are examining the three great love commandments in the Bible: love God, love one another, and love our neighbors. All three of these commands are essential as disciples (none are icing on the cake; all three of them are cake). And there is a progression: those who love God will love each other; and those who love God and each other are uniquely positioned to love their neighbors.

Today's passage, John 13:34-35 is found in a block of chapters known as "the upper room discourse" since it took place in the upper room where Jesus had gathered with His disciples to eat the Passover meal. This block of chapters is also called the "farewell discourse" because it took place the night before Jesus would be crucified and He would leave them to go back to the Father.

As always the context is important. We read earlier in chapter 13 that Jesus got up from the meal and washed the disciples' feet. He then told them that He had just given them an example; they should wash one another's feet. Why? Because "a servant is not greater than his master, ***nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him***" (v. 16). Jesus is the master and the one who is sending them; the disciples are the servants and the messengers. The message would ultimately be the gospel. As we'll see, a core reason they needed to love one another the way Jesus had loved them is because that's how they could embody the message of the gospel. They weren't messengers who merely gave information; their words ***and*** their lives were supposed to communicate the gospel.

The other significant point of context is that Judas had left (with clean feet) to go betray Jesus. And Jesus knew it. We're told that before Judas left, "Satan entered into Him." And Jesus knew it. Therefore Jesus knew that His crucifixion was a done deal. To prepare His disciples for the events of the next few days and weeks, He told them that He was leaving them and going somewhere that they could not follow. Jesus needed to prepare them to live as His disciples when He wasn't with them physically. As we'll see, the love commandment Jesus gives is at the heart of that preparation.

***Loving one another as Christ has loved us.*** (John 13:34, John 15:9,12-13) Notice that Jesus calls this a new commandment.

34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

We find commands to love others in the Old Testament. But this was a "new" commandment because Jesus set ***His love*** as the standard: "just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." Nobody had ever loved like Jesus had loved them; because of who He was and where He had come from, nobody ***could*** love like Jesus.

Jesus alone was the sinless Son of God who had left unimaginable glory with the Father to become human and live among them. John 13 describes how Jesus loved them by serving them (by washing their feet). Jesus also loved His disciples by teaching them (Matthew 5-7, Mark 4:1-34, John 13-16, etc.) , praying for them (Luke 22:31-32), correcting (Luke 22:24ff), and simply being with them. They experience Jesus as a teacher and friend who was "gentle and humble in heart" (Matthew 12:28-30). They experienced Him as the good Shepherd (John 10). In every conceivable way Jesus was morally and intellectually and spiritually superior to them; and yet everything He did was for their well-being. He never thought or said or did a selfish thing.

But Jesus' greatest expression of love for His disciples was yet to come. We'll come back to verse 35 in a few minutes, but turn with me over to chapter 15. There Jesus restates this new commandment and further explains His love for His disciples (and therefore how His disciples should love one another).

12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

You may remember that at the end of John 13, Peter had told Jesus, “I will lay down my life for you.” Jesus replied, “Actually, Peter, you will deny Me three times before tomorrow morning” (see Matthew 18:15-27).

It’s no coincidence when we read a chapter and a half later that the greatest expression of love (which is already “the greatest” - 1 Corinthians 13:13) is “that someone lay down his life for his friends.” Peter had the desire to lay down his life for Jesus, but he didn’t have the spiritual, inner strength to do so; his fear got the best of him. Jesus, by contrast, **would** actually lay down His life for Peter and for you and for me. That’s how He commands us to love each other - by **laying down our lives for each other**. In 1 John 3:16 we read:

16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

Again, this underscores how if we don’t understand and experience the love Christ has for us, there’s no way we will lay down our lives for each other. Rather, we will treat each other based on how we think the other person **deserves** to be treated or how we **feel** like treating the other person.

If we want an example of someone who allowed Christ’s love for him to shape the way he treated others, we could look at Paul’s life. In 2 Corinthians 5:14 he wrote that “the love of Christ controls us. . .” The love that Christ had for him was the controlling influence in his life. That’s why he laid down his life for so many people.

All of this implies that if you want to love other believers well, one of the most practical things you can do is make it your ambition to experience and comprehend the love that Jesus has for you and for your brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus actually told this to His disciples back in verse 9:

9 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.

The Father loved His Son, Jesus. Jesus turned around and loved His disciples in the same way. Therefore He commands, “Abide in my love.” There’s a sense in which Jesus’ love for us remains constant, but there’s another sense in which we need to remain in that love to experience it. Jude 21 says, “Keep yourself in the love of God” (which is synonymous with the love of Jesus).

My questions for you at this point are: How deeply are you experiencing the love of Jesus? And are you committed to loving other believers like Jesus has loved you? Don’t answer too quickly; there’s too much at stake in just giving the right answer here. One of the prayers we’re praying during this 21 Days is the prayer at the end of Psalm 139, “Search me, Oh God, and know my heart. . . see if there be any hurtful way in me.” Perhaps you are holding a grudge or bitterness against someone (either for good reason or out of pettiness). Whatever the case, you need to be convinced that God in Christ has loved you in ways that make your bitterness or anger unnecessary. Once you

allow the love of Christ melt away your bitterness or anger, you'll be ready to love others more fully.

The goal isn't to learn techniques for loving this person or that person even though we secretly despise them. The goal is to become the type of people who are so captivated by the love of Christ that His love flows through us. Loving others the way He loves us is an intuitive and natural thing to do. When you love others this way they experience the love of Jesus in fresh ways.

Let's return to John 13 to see what's at stake more broadly in whether or not we love each other as Jesus loved us. In John 13:35 Jesus speaks of:

***Embodying the gospel by our love for one another.*** (John 13:35) Notice how Jesus says that the distinguishing mark of true disciples is their love for one another.

35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Jesus tells His disciples that their love for one another would confirm for people that they were ***His disciples***. Remember that for Jesus “disciple” wasn't merely a title or a designation; disciple meant that you were actively learning how to live your life the way Jesus lived His life. Back in chapter 8 (verse 31) Jesus said, “If you abide in my word you are truly my disciples.” A disciple is someone whose mind is continually saturated with Jesus' teachings ***so that you can become like Him***.

That being the case, it makes sense that the way people will know that we are Jesus' disciples is if we love one another just as He has loved us. The way Jesus loved His disciples wasn't incidental to His influence in their lives or His mission. His love for them was the embodiment of the gospel. And so it makes sense that His disciples (or apprentices) would learn to love like Him so that they could embody the gospel too.

Why does it matter whether or not people know we are Jesus' disciples? Why isn't it enough that people experience us as good, generous people? It matters because our mission is to ***make disciples*** of all the nations. You can do a lot of good for a lot of people and never engage the mission of making disciples - which involves both showing people the love of Christ and telling people about the love of Christ. We'll talk about this more next week when we talk about loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Jesus doesn't make this exact point, but I think He is clearly implying that convincing people that we're His disciples is an important step in people actually becoming His disciples themselves. Our words about Jesus are credible only when we embody the gospel by loving each other the way Jesus has loved us. The gospel obviously has content; we have to get the message right. But like Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13, our knowledge is useless without love.

As I mentioned earlier, the three great love commandments (love God, love one another, and love our neighbors) are intertwined. If we love God, we will love one

another. And if we love one another, we'll embody the gospel for our neighbors. Since Faith seeks to be a church of disciples who lead people to Christ, the stakes couldn't be higher.

Let me suggest a couple of applications from what we've seen in John 13:34-35. These are applications for believers; if you are not yet a believer, you're about to listen in on something of an "in house" conversation we need to have this morning. **First**, identify a few other believers whom you intend to love as Christ loved the church. I'm talking about specific people you know. Dallas Willard in *Life Without Lack* warns against having a commitment to loving *everybody*. You don't and can't actually love everybody; you can only love somebody - specific people. It might be some of your friends or your life group or Bible study or (if you're a college student) your campus ministry. Be creative, be bold, go for it, and ask the question, "What would it look like for us to love each other the way Christ has loved us?" See where that takes you. . .

If you don't really know any other believers very well, we'd recommend that you participate in Rooted (which begins this Thursday) or in a life group. You will develop relationships in which you can love one another as Christ has loved you. I realize that this is a risk for some of you. But it's a risk worth taking because you are a member of the body of Christ; you need others and others need you for full maturity.

**Second**, find ways to live an appropriately transparent life so that others can see your love for one another. In some cultures it's easier for a watching world to see believers love one another; due to many factors they live their lives out in the open. We tend to be very individualistic; and our "Christian life" is often isolated from the rest of our lives. And there's a tension here because we're not supposed to trumpet our righteousness or try to impress people. My appeal is simply that if you and your Christian friends embody the gospel because of your love for each other, spend some time thinking about praying about how you might invite others into your lives so that they see your love.

Francis Schaffer wrote about this verse 50 years ago in a book entitled "The Mark of a Christian." He pointed out that Jesus didn't say, "They will know you are Christians by your haircuts. . . or by your jewelry. . .but by your love." Listen again to Jesus' words:

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