

THE TRIUMPH OF LOVE AND THE MARK OF THE CHRISTIAN

This morning we are beginning a message series that will bring us through Easter. It is titled, *The Triumph of Goodness In The Last Days of Jesus*. What a timely theme for us during the present times. In the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, goodness triumphs even though, at times, evil seems to be winning. That message gives us hope because the story of Jesus is not just his story, but it is our story too – or at least it can be ours. It is a story that invites us to take part, to enter in, to become one of Jesus' people, and live by faith in the assurance that goodness will triumph in our story as well as we believe in Him.

The first twelve chapters of John's gospel cover three years of Jesus' life. But in **Chapters 13-17**, you have five chapters devoted to a single night. It is clearly important. It was the night before the crucifixion. Jesus gathered with his disciples in a borrowed upstairs room to share their last supper. The evening began with Jesus doing something surprising. As the disciples reclined in the lamplight around a low table, Jesus stood up and took off his outer robe. He wrapped a towel around his waist, picked up a basin of water, and began to wash their feet. What is happening here? **Verse 1** points us to the significance. It says: *Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.* Those words introduce the story of Christ washing the disciples' feet.

So think about what is happening in the Upper Room. Because here...

I. JESUS REVEALS THE LOVE GOD OFFERS US ALL.

It is interesting that in the first twelve chapters of the gospel of John, the word "love" occurs twelve times. But in these next five chapters, **John 13-17**, that make up the teaching of Jesus in the Upper Room, the word "love" occurs 34 times! The knowledge of the love of God is the spiritual dynamic that changes lives. While working on a podcast this week, I connected with an old friend, and in sharing my story of coming to faith, I said, *"Before I became a Christian, I did not feel very guilty, but I did feel profoundly empty."* I was longing for something I couldn't even name. I now know to have been the love of God. The knowledge and experience of the love of God is what every human heart longs for, even if you don't understand what you are longing for

or what you are missing. Here in the Upper Room, Jesus reveals the love of God in an astonishing way. He washes the feet of his disciples. He wants you to see and understand this.

A. Sometimes, the love of God is resisted out of a misguided humility.

That's what happens in **verses 6-9**. When Jesus tries to wash Peter's feet, Peter objects. Jesus says, *Peter, you have to let me wash your feet*. The foot washing is not just a kindness. It is a symbol of cleansing, a symbol of forgiveness washing away the filth of our sin.

Imagine if God manifested his presence in human form here with us now. When something like this happened in the Bible, people usually fell on their faces and prayed to God for mercy. They were stunned by God's majesty and suddenly deeply aware of their sins. But imagine if God manifested his presence, or if the incarnate Christ came, here in our midst in human form. What if he took a bowl of water and a towel and began to go down the aisles and knelt at your feet and washed them? How would you respond? Could it be real that the creator, Almighty God, would bend down to show gentleness and love and care like that? Could you receive an expression of love like that from God? I think sometimes we are like Peter. Peter didn't think it was right or appropriate for Jesus to wash his feet. He had a clear sense of what he thought was right and wrong. It made him uncomfortable. Could it be that the love of God in Christ is so gracious and free and kind and gentle with you that you are uncomfortable just yielding to it and resting in it? It can be hard to quit squirming, shut up, submit to be still, and let Him wash you and love you just as you are, dirty feet, soiled story, defiled self but in his hands, embraced and washed clean. That is where we belong.

Peter shows us that sometimes the love of God is resisted because of a misguided humility. The story of Judas shows us a different truth.

B. Sometimes, the love of God is rejected because of stubborn hard-heartedness.

That is what happens to Judas. Listen to **verses 20-21**, *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.*" ²¹ *After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me."* Jesus doesn't single out Judas publicly, but he testifies that one of them has not only refused to accept

him but is on the verge of betraying him. Without exposing Judas openly, Jesus is appealing to him to face the truth. Jesus says in effect: "*Judas, I already know the truth about you.*" What would have happened if Judas broke and said: "Jesus, I am the one, forgive me?" Jesus offers him that chance without bullying or shaming. Judas would rather hold on to the pretense than own up to the truth. What about you? Are you honest with yourself and with God? There are times in our lives, maybe many times, when Jesus Christ says in effect, "*Dear friend, please face the truth.*"

When Jesus confronts us with the truth the love is still offered.

Beginning in **verse 23** (and down through **verse 26**), we're told how Peter tells John to ask Jesus who is going to betray him. In **verse 26**, Jesus says, "*It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.*" So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Today if we wanted to single out a guest for a special honor, we might offer a toast. In those days, the host would pick a tasty little piece of meat, place it on some unleavened bread, dip it into a specially seasoned sauce, and then personally hand it to the one to whom he wanted to show a special kindness. I don't believe this is a cynical thing Jesus is doing. He has just washed the disciple's feet to show them His love for them. That morsel that he dipped in the dish and offered to Judas was a sign of affection and an offer of grace. Jesus appealed to Judas with the truth and with grace.

This part of the story ends dramatically. Judas took the morsel offered him but refused the mercy it represented. It's hard not to see Judas as symbolic of a person who loves to get stuff from God but has no love for God when God doesn't do what he wants. Do you love God? Do you let his gifts lead you to Him -- his heart? The last words in this part of the story seem symbolic. **Verse 30**, *So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.* Judas stepped out of the light and into the darkness in more ways than one.

I want to use this series to challenge all of you to look at Jesus. What is your response to him? Are you like Peter? Does it almost seem unreal, not right, too good to be true for you to submit to a love as great as that offered you in Christ? Do not resist the grace of God. Later, as we take the Lord's Supper, receive the reality to which the bread and the cup remind you. If you are at unsure of your relationship to Christ or the reality of your faith or conversion, come to Christ and

trust him. Come to him, and he will not turn you away. Don't walk away from His grace.

After Judas walked off into the darkness, Jesus turned to the disciples. Look at **verses 33-35**. He told them he was leaving and said, *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. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.*"

II. JESUS CALLS YOU TO LIVE A LIFE OF LOVE LIKE HIM.

A. Jesus wants, in us, a kind of radiant reflection of his own love.

This is the new commandment. It's *not* that there had never been a command to love before. There had been, but Jesus reasserts the old commandment with a new force, clarity, and priority for his followers.

God saves us by his grace. What that means is that you don't have to earn His love or forgiveness. Christ died on the cross to pay for our sins. He rose again to be our Lord and our Savior. When we turn to Him as our Lord and Savior and trust Him for our salvation, he accepts us and makes us his children. But he gives us this grace, not so that we can live looser lives but so that we can live deeper lives. God wants us to empower us to love. He wants us to obey him because his will for us is good. He promises grace so that we can obey him -- not out of a fearful attempt to earn his love but out of the fullness of a love already poured out in our hearts and promised for eternity!

Do you think all God wants for you is that you be correctly instructed in Biblical doctrines and live a reasonably moral life? There are many people – even in churches who have been given good religious instruction and are reasonably moral people, but their personal relationship with God is either completely mechanical, lacking in any radiance, or totally non-existent. Jesus wants a relationship with you in which His love becomes such a source of strength and love in you that it marks you in this world as one of his. Having a certain amount of head-knowledge and being a fairly nice and moral person does not mark you out in this world as a follower of Jesus. Christ-like love does.

B. What does it mean to love as Christ loves?

1st Christ-like love does not stand on rights, fairness, or status. It is humble and giving. It rejects pride and serves others. Look at **verse 14**. *If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet.*

You also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.

2nd Christ-like love responds to imperfection with grace and kindness. The foot-washing, in particular, is symbolic of that. Perhaps Peter was thinking of this when later, in **1 Peter 4:8**, *He wrote, Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.* Francois Fenelon said, *"We need to be very patient with the faults of others. The most perfect people in the world have many imperfections, and so do we. And sometimes it is quite difficult for us to tolerate each other. We are to 'bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ' (Gal. 6:2), and I think that means, among other things, that we are to bear the burdens of each other's imperfections. ¹* The phrase, *the law of Christ*, refers to this new commandment Jesus gave us. *Christ-like love responds to imperfection with grace.*

3rd A third thing we need to know about love is that Christ-like love begins in the heart. Jesus isn't just acting as if he loves. His actions reveal his heart. I've heard people argue this way: *"Look, the Bible commands us to love each other, but you can't command feelings, so the command to love must just mean to act a certain way toward each other."* Do you think Jesus is saying it doesn't matter what is going on inside as long as you do the correct thing? Is his love for us not heartfelt? **1 Peter 1:22** says: *Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.* It is true the fact that you don't feel loving is no excuse for treating people badly. So yes, act loving even if you don't feel loving. But here's the thing -- don't settle for that! Would you want the children in your family to have hearts filled with indifference, coldness, hardness, impatience, and bitterness toward each other? Would you be satisfied with correct conduct alone if there was no inward warmth and caring for each other? When Christ commands us to love each other from the heart. And he is the one who makes it possible for us to live like that.

CONCLUSION

There is an illustration I have used before that has a lot of merit. In his book, *"Why Am I Afraid to Love,"* Author John Powell tells of how he once asked a friend of his who was a psychiatrist, "How can you teach people to love?" In his answer, the learned doctor pointed out that we are like someone with a toothache, totally occupied with our own suffering. *"This is a pain-filled world in which we are living. The pains, which reside deep in the human hearts around us, are not unlike*

toothaches. We go to bed with them at night, and we wake up with them in the morning... Most human beings are so turned-in by their own pains that they cannot get enough out of themselves to love to any great extent." I think there is a lot of truth in that, but here's another truth. If you know Christ, you have, in him, someone to turn to with your pains. The unspoken assumption of this command is that when you know Christ and have God at work in you can choose, by faith, to draw strength and comfort from Christ's love for you - then take the deep love that the Lord Jesus Christ has placed in your heart and love others from your heart.

He who, out of His great compassion for you, loved you and gave Himself to pay for your sins can pour His love out in your life and through your life! But, you will have to take His love to heart. Your capacity to love others from the heart will be in proportion to your awareness and dependence on the love of God for you.

Remember how Curtis said last week that there are some people who have the ability to inspire and empower and encourage you and when you are with them, instead of feeling drained, you feel energized? In Christ, you have a risen Savior who is present with you by his Holy Spirit. He came into this world to reveal the love that he wants you first to know and then to share. He did it, and that was the triumph of goodness in the last days of Jesus.

Wherever there is a failure of love, bring it to Christ in honest repentance and confession. Ask Christ to heal *your* heart. Ask Christ to pour His grace and His presence and His Holy Spirit in each area where there is a failure of love. Believe in Him. Will power does not change you. Time does not change you. Christ does.

1 Thessalonians 3:12 says, *"May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else."* Love can triumph in our lives. It can triumph in your life. Turn to Christ and let Him wash you clean. Trust him who in love died to pay for your sins and in power rose again from the dead. Make him your Savior. It is all grace, kindness, freely offered. Ask for it. Trust in it and then let it so fill you that you live in love for him.

Amen

¹ Francois Fenelon, "Let Go," letter 21