

On this MLK Weekend I want to begin with a quote that speaks to the heart of what we are talking about in our new series to start the year.

[SLIDE] “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr. King is saying we are a part of each other’s lives, and the way we live matters because it affects us all. While he’s speaking of humanity here, it’s also the truth for followers of Jesus. You and I belong to one another, we are part of each other’s lives, woven together by the Holy Spirit into a single garment called the Church, and we have a direct impact on each other’s lives. God has given us guidance on how to share our lives together through biblical commands called the one anothers. They are commands that express our mutuality, the ways in which to live out our belonging, and they are the focus of our series.

We started last week by looking at Jesus’ command to love one another, and I got to experience that love this past week. Based on a story I told you last Sunday, our staff got together and sent me a note that said, “Just want you to know your gang is behind you”. It was accompanied by this picture. **[SLIDE: Pic]** What a loving team to belong to! If you weren’t here last week, I encourage you to go on our website and watch last week’s sermon.

Last week we defined love as **an unconditional, self-giving, others-benefitting expression of my goodwill and affection**. But how does that happen and what does it look like? Do we just wake up and say, “I think I’ll be loving today”? Unfortunately, it’s not that easy. We may be a new creation in Christ and indwelt with his Spirit, but we also have this part of us called the flesh, and your flesh loves only one person in the whole world: you. So if love is self-giving and others-benefitting, we have something to overcome. Thankfully Jesus shows us how.

[SLIDE] To love like Jesus, abide in love. We read that Jesus said, “As I have loved you, love one another.” He is our provision to love and our inspiration. He’s also our example, as we saw by his washing of his disciples’ feet. But acknowledging his love and understanding his example isn’t enough. To overcome our flesh, we must stay close.

[SLIDE: John 15:4-5, 8, 12-13] ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing... ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples... 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.

Fruit is the product of a healthy tree full of life, and fruit grows for the benefit and feeding of another. As followers of Jesus, God desires that we bear the fruit of love for one another, but that fruit of love cannot simply be willed by us. It grows only if we abide in Jesus. Abide is a word we don’t use often. It makes you think of abode, which is a home. The Greek word Jesus uses means to remain, to continue, to endure. It expresses consistency over the long-term. That means all of us have a decision to make. Will Jesus be our spiritual home, or will he be our spiritual

Airbnb? Will he be the headquarters of my life, or a place I visit from time to time? Our decision will have a direct impact on the amount of fruit we bear and our ability to love one another.

This past Christmas break, I had the somewhat surreal experience of researching colleges with my oldest son, Christian. It was an exciting time, but it was also sobering. It struck me that in eighteen months, he's gone. Yes, he'll home for holidays and summer, but he will no longer be abiding in our home and abiding in the presence of Martha and me. That gave me a sense of urgency because there is particular fruit I want to see in his life, and my time to influence that on a daily basis is growing short.

Thankfully we don't graduate away from Jesus, but we can choose to move away from him and no longer abide. God calls us to remain so that we can bear fruit. If you are struggling to abide, I want to give you a few ideas you can start this week. All of the Bible apps on your phone have Bible reading plans, or just pick a book like the Psalms and read a chapter a day. If you are in Life Groups, use the homework questions to dig into Scripture and connect with God. Do that throughout the week, not the ten minutes before your group meets. Sign up for our Spiritual Disciplines Training Experience where you'll learn different ways to abide in Jesus. And if all of that is too much, begin your day by praising God for three things that are true about him and end your day thanking God for three things. All of these move you closer to God. All of these pursue greater intimacy, and God will meet you wherever you are, because he wants you to abide and bear fruit, particularly love.

Jesus also gives us one other way to abide. **[SLIDE: John 15:9-10] ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.**

Obedience is not the drudgery of the Christian life, nor is it the way we earn God's love. **Obedience is our loving and faithful response to God's love and to the boundaries he sets forth in our relationship with him.** It is the pathway to intimacy with God that draws us near to Jesus, allows us to experience his love, and enables us to give it to others.

Think about a campfire. The closer you are to fire the more that fire can impact your life. If you get far away from it, you'll grow cold. If you stay close to it, you will stay warm. And if you are close to the fire for an extended period of time, abiding/remaining in it, you not only feel the warmth of the fire, you become warm yourself. Your skin, your clothes, all heat up so much so that you begin to radiate that heat and have the capacity to warm up someone else.

It's the same with Jesus. Disobedience keeps us far away from the warmth of his love. He still loves us, but we prevent that love from working in our lives and that diminishes our capacity to love others. In Matthew 24 Jesus is talking about the signs of the end times and speaks directly to this relationship between obedience and love. **[SLIDE: Matthew 24:12] ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.** As disobedience increases, love decreases, because **you can't give what you don't have.** But obedience keeps us close to Jesus and therefore keeps us close to the warmth of his love. The more we abide in his love, the more we experience it for ourselves, and become carriers of it so that it radiates from us to one another. You want to love someone today? Start with obeying Jesus and see what happens.

[SLIDE] To love like Jesus, lay down ‘self’ and lead with love. If you’ve ever been to a wedding, you’ve likely heard what we are about to read. It’s called the love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, but its context is anything but marital bliss. It was written to a church deeply divided, dishonoring to God in way they took communion, and given to ranking the importance of its members based on their spiritual gifts. Paul corrects the way they take communion in chapter 11, speaks of the unity of the body of Christ and the necessity of each member and their gifts in chapter 12, and then tells them they are having these problems because they are missing something. So he shows them what he calls “a still more excellent way.”

[SLIDE: 1 Corinthians 13:1-7] If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Have you ever considered that the expression of the best part of you could ultimately be worthless? Our presence, our gifts, our wisdom, our experience and counsel, our efforts all have the potential to bless one another, but if they are not offered in love, they are just self-serving noise that do nothing for the other and are rejected by God. Over the past few years, some of the best known and most incredibly gifted pastors have been disqualified because the most important part was missing; love.

Paul does not give us the definition of love in this passage. Instead, he shows us what it does and does not do, and he makes clear love is entirely focused on the other person. He tells us love waits patiently, moves with kindness, and is incompatible with our own agenda, our acclaim, and our sense of entitlement. V7 is a great memory verse. It says love puts up with everything, believes the best of the other, wants the best for the other, and keeps going on behalf of the other. Love rejoices when others thrive.

I was recently reminded of this truth in talking to one of my boys. I am intentional with them, speak into their lives, and want the best for them, but I was stopped in my tracks when we were discussing my approach. I asked him about it, and he said, “Sometimes, when you came home, it would be nice if you said “hello” first.” It caused me to check my motivation, and it sent a clear message from my son: “Remind me that you love me, so I know that all you say and do is because of that.”

People will be infinitely more receptive to the exercise of our gifts when they have already experienced the extent of our love. A great habit to get into as you seek to practice the one another is, before you move towards that other person, ask yourself “Is my motivation to do this love?” If the answer is anything other than yes, hit pause, and examine yourself. If it’s not about love, it’s likely about you. If it is about love, it’s about the other, and that’s where God wants us to be as we live these out.

I want to close this morning with a story of loving one another that happened in our midst, and then give time for all of us to do some business with God. In addition to being MLK Weekend, it's also Sanctity of Human Life Day today. It's a day that reflects on the infinite worth of all life, with particular focus on the pre-born. That's something we need to talk about regularly, but I want to focus this morning on an act of love towards one of our own who was desperate to know and experience the love of Jesus. A woman in our congregation recently submitted her courageous next step, and this is what she said:

"I shared with a small group of ladies at church that I had an abortion 25 years ago. I was shamed and fearful but sharing with these women led to me receiving God's grace and forgiveness, freedom from this shame and guilt, and the desire to help other women do the same."

This is why God has given us one another. These women, who loved her like they have been loved by Jesus, changed her life forever. Loving one another is more than being nice to each other. It's being a living, breathing reminder of the love God has given us so that we can all live the life God has for us. And I want what she experienced to be experienced by everyone with the same story.

For those suffering from guilt and shame over their decisions around this in the past, there should be no safer or loving place in this world than the church. I read a statistic that said over 70% of Christian women would not feel comfortable talking to their pastor about an unplanned pregnancy and the options she has, and it breaks my heart. I commit to you this morning to have that conversation with you in love. I will tell you the truth, but it will be drenched in love. If you don't feel comfortable talking to me, I understand. We have wonderful women on our staff who would be eager to have that conversation with you. And if you don't want to talk to them, we have resources that we can direct you to. Cheryl Read will be at the Connecting Center if you'd like to know more, or if you'd like to serve women and men who are facing this moment of life.

Let me also say this: If you have this in your past, God loves you, God loves you, God loves you, and he offers you grace and mercy and forgiveness and freedom in Jesus, just like the woman I told you about experienced. Please do not suffer any longer in silence. Run to the cross. He is there, he is able and willing, and he is loving. And run to your brothers and sisters in this church. They want to give to you the love of God they have experienced themselves. You are not alone. The love of God shines brightest when we are at our darkest, and God has given us the incredible privilege to shine that light into each other's lives.

I'd like to end with a time of directed prayer, a time for all of us to draw near to Jesus to abide in him and experience his love.

1. Jesus said, “**Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.**” Take a minute to rejoice in that good news and worship God for laying down his life for you.
2. What, in your life, do you believe is beyond the reach of God’s love? Tell him, listen, and believe him when he tells you it isn’t true. Nothing is beyond his love, so receive it.
3. Ask God to show you how you are abiding and one thing you can do this week to abide more. It might be a spiritual discipline. It might be obeying where you are currently disobeying.
4. Ask God who he has placed in your life to love like Christ has loved you. Ask for the courage to do so this week.