

XI. The Church in Biblical Perspective
The Ekklesia: God's Church for the Ages
"God's Call To Love—Our Ministry To One Another"
John 13:31-35
Dr. Harry Reeder
May 8, 2010 – Morning Sermon

Please make your way to Acts 2 for there are three passages of Scripture that we'll be looking at. We are in this series *The Ekklesia: God's Church*. So let's start with Acts 2 which is a foundational text that we have been using that lays the profile of the church from which the whole world was turned upside down, the first church in Jerusalem. Acts 2:42-47 says **42** *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

The grass withers, the flower fades and by God's grace may this His Word which abides forever be preached for you.

This week I was with a fellow who was working on a book and he was asking me some questions. He said, "One a side note can I ask you a question?" I said, "Sure you've been asking me questions all day." He said, "Do you think we're going to be able to talk to people in heaven that are there and talk about stuff that happened here?" I said, "You know, I think so. In fact I have a whole list of the people I want to go talk to and ask questions of, not the least of which will be the Apostles." Let me tell you about one of those Apostles. He was the last one to die according to historical records and before he died he was probably the youngest of all the disciples. His mother was Jesus' mother's sister. So he was a cousin to Jesus. He was a fisherman. Two times in the Bible we hear along with his brother in an argument about who was going to have the key place in the Kingdom of God and who would sit at the right or left. His father's name was Zebedee. He and his brother were called the sons of thunder and he was the one that Jesus entrusted the care of His mother to which would have been his aunt. Now who am I talking about?

I'm talking about John. He wrote five books in your Bible which were I John, II John, III John, the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation. This is extra Biblical records but there are multiple sources so I think this is probably accurate. At the conclusion of his life, as we know in the Bible, he was overseeing the churches at Asia Minor particularly the mother church which was Ephesus. We are told that they found a way to get him there in his elderly age before he died. He had survived an attempt against his life and when they brought him there he was frail. They gathered around him at the church at Ephesus. These records tell us they had to carry him in. He leaned up on an elbow and motioned for them to come close. His breath and voice were such that he could not speak loudly. They listened to what were probably the last words they would

hear from the Apostle John. He said, "Love one another." He mustered the strength again and said, "Love one another." Then a final time he says, "I say to you love one another."

Why would the Apostle John with only so much breath pick those words to state to the church? I hope in these next few minutes you'll get a glimpse why. I want to back up for a minute. We only have one more sermon in this series, God's Ekklesia; the Church." The reason we are preaching it is for two reasons. One is we are in desperate need in this culture of a Gospel awakening. We are in desperate need of a great awakening of the Gospel. That is the need of our culture. The Gospel would take men and women and save them, transform them, and save them, their lives and their families and everywhere they go. That salt and light is desperately needed but there is no record of any Gospel awakening in Scripture or in history if it does not come from God, by the Spirit, the exaltation of Christ and comes through the church of Jesus Christ. Therefore we have a need today of a revived church.

Today the church thinks what we need to be is relevant. I just think we need to stay with the Gospel. There is nothing more relevant to the Gospel. We don't need to make it relevant. It is relevant. I think we need to be related to people, connected to people and loving to people but what the church desperately needs today is a revival. So we have gone back to say that revival isn't to have a pastor that comes up with an exotic program and an ingenious scheme. We don't need to re-engineer the church. By the way, the whole issue for us today is not cosmetic acceptance by the culture because they are affirming us. No, the answer is under the eye of God we are to be Christ centered, Gospel driven and Spirit filled.

This is what we said at Briarwood. Our mission is For God's glory, Briarwood is committed to **EQUIPPING CHRISTIANS** to worship God and reach Birmingham to reach the world for Christ. So that was a second reason for this series. Last year, our 50th year at Briarwood, we have been able to praise the Lord for what God graciously did, has done to us and through us. We are an imperfect church, sinners saved by grace but God has been kind and gracious to use us. Now what do we do as we walk into the next millennium with this great need of a revived church? What do we do for the next 50 years or until Jesus comes again?

Here is the vision to fulfill that vision. For Coming Generations, Briarwood desires to be a Christ-centered, Gospel-driven, Spirit-filled **EQUIPPING CENTER** where every member is a minister and a missionary. To be that minister as we looked at Acts 2 we saw that there are four ministries that you and I are to do. My job is to lead in the equipping of you. Your job is to do these ministries and we saw them in Acts 2. It says they were praising God so the first sign of a spiritually, revived, healthy church, the W.E.L.L. church is that the W is they worship God. They have God centered worship that is authentic. That is our ministry of upreach to God. Secondly, we looked at last week (E) evangelism that is intentional which is our ministry to the world of outreach. Then what we are looking at this morning the matter of (L) love.

Did you notice in Acts 2 that it said they were praising God which is worship? The Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved which is evangelism. They were selling their possessions. They were giving what they had in themselves sacrificially whenever someone was in need. They didn't wait for a program. They didn't wait for Rome to start a program that was government based. They as

individuals in the church didn't even wait for the church to come up with a program. They just connected to one another and said "What I have is available to meet your needs." Therefore they began to do that as even their possessions were being laid aside for the primacy of loving one another. Finally they (L) learned and we'll look at that next week in our concluding study.

What about this matter of loving one another? I thought it was interesting that in the Providence of God we are dealing with this subject in this series on Mother's Day. I planned that (smile). It was absolutely astounding when I realized it was going to fall like that but let me throw a fly in the ointment here. I think a church family knows how to love because its families know how to love. I think families know how to love because of a husband/wife relationship in their parental calling in life but now I'm going to throw the fly in the ointment. I believe the key to love in a family is not the mother. That is the experience of love. I think the key to love in the family is the father as he functions as a husband. "Husbands love your wives as Christ loves the church." I believe husbands set the standard of love in the way they care for their wife and with their wife their children.

The big dynamic in the Christian life is order and ardor. Some of us like order and some of us like ardor. Some of us like ardor to the exclusion of order. Some of us like order to the exclusion of ardor but I believe order in a family doesn't come from the father. I think it comes from the mother as a wife as she is submissive and comes along side of her husband. I believe she sets the tone. Now having said that let me go back to the other. I believe a husband sets the tone of love but I think the experience of love, the existential dynamic of love actually comes through the delivery system of a mother. You get sick, you're in bed and you yell out. Who do you call for? You don't call for daddy. I have three kids and I don't remember any of them when they got sick in the middle of the night calling out "Daddy would you come here?" I never heard it. It was "Mommy come here! Mommy I need you!" There's that special dynamic of how a mother delivers the nurturing touch of love in one's life. That's why it says "Older women teach the younger women to love their husbands and love their children" because they bring the experience of love even as the father sets the tone of love in his relationship with his wife.

What is this thing of loving one another? What is this ministry of in-reach to one another and why is it so important? When this son of thunder, John, writes in I John, II John, III John and the Gospel of John he is always talking about love. I want to take you to one of the key text that I believe was in John's mind when he got up on his elbow and said to that church "love one another" three times. It is John 13. John 13 is the concluding of John's account of the upper room experience. Jesus in the week of His passion meets with the disciples in the upper room. Many things happened in this upper room. One thing that happens in the upper room is John and James are having an argument of who is going to be the greatest in the Kingdom and that was the second time it happened. The first time they had this argument their mother was leading the argument for them. Secondly, nobody bothered to care for one another's needs at the Supper so Jesus got up and washed the feet of the disciples. Jesus gave this glorious statement of what the Kingdom of God was going to be like as He taught them and then they sang a hymn and went out afterwards.

So now let's look at what happens in John 13:31-35 which says **31** *When he had gone out, (the Supper was through) Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God*

is glorified in him. (Judas has just gone out to betray Jesus.) **32** *If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once.* **33** *Little children* (A term of endearment where Jesus is speaking to the disciples, the embryo of the New Testament church), *yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.'* (The disciples are thinking what do you want me to do until You come back?) **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* (the love for one another) *all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*” So we are supposed to have a love for one another.

Jesus said this was a new commandment so this Divine precept is now being given to us and delivered to us and there are two or three observations I want to give you from it. The first one is that in this glorious precept He has given He calls it a new commandment. New? Love is not new – Exodus 20, Leviticus 9, Deuteronomy 6 all talk about love. Love the Lord with all your heart, soul and mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love is all over the Old Testament. Even loving your neighbor is not new. What is new about this? I believe there are two things that are new about it. He says “A new commandment I give to you.” By the way, by saying that what is He telling you? He also gave the old commandments. Now the One who gave Moses on the mountain the commandments that you have, I have now come according to those commandments to redeem you and now the Lord of glory says “I give you a new commandment.” How is it new?

I want to suggest two ways that it is new. Number one it is new because He has begun to define prioritizing the loving of neighbors. Love one another as a priority. That’s not the end game. That doesn’t mean you don’t love your enemies because He has already told us to love our enemies. So we love all of our neighbors but there are those neighbors that are in the body of Christ that are a priority where I’m to love them first, not last, not only, but first and then through them into the world. Then the second thing is the One who gives the commandment becomes the model of the commandment. “Love just as I have loved you.” In the Old Testament we said love and it pointed to Christ and now Christ has come. Christ in His work of grace now totally defines, illustrates and models what this love is supposed to be like. So you are to love one another just as I have loved you and if you love one another qualified as I have loved you then the world will know that you are My disciples. That will be the apologetic to the world.

Now do you see why John is saying this to the church at Ephesus? Why didn’t he say “Now go preach the Gospel to the world”? He only had so much breath so here is what I know. The words of Gospel as you go to the world will take on powerful, effective meaning as the living of the Gospel among yourselves demonstrates it to the world. So love one another as a priority. It’s not the end game. I have seen it in your lives in these last two weeks. I can give illustrations time and time again where you as a priority as soon as that disaster hit you immediately went to one another. You begin to cut down trees, open up your homes, bring groceries, bring water and all kinds of stuff to help your neighbor in need. Then as soon as you did it I received all kinds of accounts of it that I can use as sermon illustrations that I have been writing down. Then you would walk next door and say “We’re over here helping them can we help you?” So it was a love that was

prioritized to one another and then overflowed into the world even as you're now overflowing into Cullman, to Tuscaloosa, and Pratt City having started as a priority.

I know the best thing I can do to help wives here is to love my wife first. That doesn't mean I don't seek to help equip the women of this church as a pastor, but it does mean that my first priority has to be my wife. That's not where it stops though but that is where it has to begin. If we're going to love the world it can't be an emptiness here. It has to be a love for one another that overflows to the world that the world looks back and says "Aha, that's what it's like when Christians love each other." They know that you're My disciples.

I want to go through what I believe is one of the greatest definitive texts on the love of Christ, God's love for you through Christ and Christ's love for you as the Father sent Him to redeem you. That passage is in Romans 5. In Romans 5 you see this definitive statement of what love is and it starts off with a glorious statement as well. Romans 5:1, 5-11 says *1 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (How do the guilty become innocent?) 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. 6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. 11 More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

I want to draw out five things from this passage about the love of God, love Divine, all other loves excelling. Our model is to love one another as Christ has loved you. How has Christ loved you? Number one the love of Christ is thoughtful and timely. "At the right time Christ died for the ungodly." Do you remember how many times He said "No, it's not My time"? Love is thoughtful and timely. I was in my car the other day and saw this bumper sticker that said "Do random acts of kindness." I thought "That's interesting" but then I thought it's really non-Christian. Christians don't do random acts of kindness. God doesn't do random acts of love. God does purposeful, intentional, thoughtful, timely love. God's people are called to a thoughtful and timely love.

Secondly, God's people are called to a sacrificial and costly love. Earlier we read they were selling their possessions and properties to help someone's need. They were sacrificially loving. It's interesting to note there are six words in the Greek for love in the Bible. There is *storge* love which is a family love. There is *eros* love which is marital sexual love. There is *philio* love which is brotherly love. Christianity was fixed on one word that is not used often in the Greek language and that's the one that is embraced. That is *agape* love which is sacrificial love where we lay down our life and what we have in life and ministry. It's costly love.

This isn't a political speech but it was interesting about eight years ago there was an individual who will remain nameless who was promoting to our country that we needed to take care of the needy. The person was introducing bill after bill after bill for

government program after government program to accomplish that and there were those who opposed it. So it came across that this man was sensitive to the poor and these people who don't want to pass it are not. Then when that person decided they had to run for office they had to make their income tax returns public. I remembered the number. His charitable giving that year was \$363. Oh he was wonderfully sensitive to the needy with everybody else's money but what about his? God calls us to give up in order to give out and lay down even our lives – sacrificially and costly.

Do you know what the amazing thing on the Titanic was? Some of the richest most powerful men in the world died so that day laborers, women and children could live. Laying down your life is not natural. That is something that has to be learned. Sacrificial, costly love – it costs to love - time, money, possessions. Why? That leads me to number three.

Thirdly, love is observable and demonstrative. Most of us treat love as a theoretical discussion, as an abstract principle, as a philosophical concept and something that everybody else ought to be doing and we sit in judgment as to how well they're doing it or not doing it, when in reality love is timely because it's thoughtful. It is sacrificial and costly therefore it will be observable. You don't do it to be observed but it always leaves tracks. In the text it said "God demonstrated His love for us..." How do I know God loved me? He gave His Son and His Son gave His life for me. It was sacrificial and costly. It was demonstrative and observable. I can look at it in that Jesus Christ comes into this world, why? "For God so love He gave His only begotten Son" and then Christ sets His face to that cross. At that cross He embraces what He despises completely and that is sin. He endured the unendurable and that is the hell that was due to me and to you as He becomes sin and drinks to the bottom the cup of God's wrath so that He could then give to you a cup that you can't drink to the bottom, the cup of life which is unfathomable and forever.

I know God loves me because this is not a philosophical discussion about the theory of love in a religious book. It is the record of the love of God that gave His Son, who gave Himself and became that sin, endured that condemnation so that I could be given eternal life and even the faith I exercise He gave to me. "For by grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God not of works lest any man should boast."

Fourthly, therefore love is redemptive and effective. It takes people right where they are but it doesn't leave them there. It is redemptive. It buys them back and it is effective for it addresses the need thoughtfully, not in a way to assuage the feelings of the one who is loving but in a way to benefit the one who is being loved. Thoughtful, timely, sacrificial, costly, observable, and demonstrative therefore redemptive and effective.

Finally, it comes to people who don't deserve it nor merit it. Love is unmerciful and undeserved. It comes to people who are sinners who don't deserve it or merit it and that's the way God's love came to you. I'm going to say something that I will know will be taken out of context or misrepresented but I need to say it. It is a burden on my heart and that is this well intentioned but false teaching that God's love is unconditional. It is not. If God's love was unconditional then He would have just took you to heaven. God's love met His conditions. God will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. The soul that sinneth shall surely die. In the book of Exodus it says "God will by no means leave the guilty unpunished" but in the next verse it says "but He will show loving kindness to

thousands.” God, we’re all guilty so how can You show loving kindness to us if under Your holiness You must bring judgment to us. God says “I have the Way. I’ll put My Son in your place. He will meet the conditions. By the way, you don’t deserve it and you don’t merit it but I will do this freely. I will meet the conditions of My holiness and you don’t merit it nor do you deserve it but I have loved you.”

I tried to pause when I was reading this. When did God send His Son to die for us and when did Jesus die for us? It was when we were yet sinners. When we were what? It was when we were ungodly. When we were what? It was when we were enemies. When we were what? It was when we were helpless God sent His love to redeem us. It was costly, sacrificial, thoughtful and timely to save us.

The reason I’m jealous for this is because I want you to understand. I had someone say to me one time “Pastor, I did wrong but here’s what I figure. It’s easier to get forgiveness than permission.” I said, “I know what you’re talking about but among us, friend to friend, if you’re a believer that phrase would never leave your lips.” Forgiveness isn’t cheap and it’s not easy. It cost God His Son’s life. It cost His Son to submit to what He sweat blood over submitting to, becoming in our sin offering and then taking our judgment so we could have life.

I want to stop here for a minute. You may be reading this for religion or friendship or God may have moved upon your heart to seek. I want you to know I have a great message to give to you. God’s love has been poured out in His Son and God’s Holy Spirit is being poured out right now. He is calling you to come to His Son – love Divine, all love excelling. Religion isn’t calling you but Jesus Christ who loved you and you didn’t deserve it is calling you. I want to go a step further. You needed Him but you didn’t want Him. He wanted you but He didn’t need you and then He laid down His life freely for you that you could have life. That is the love Divine and excels all other love. It sets the pattern for our love for one another.

Let me give you a takeaway on this. How can we embrace this in our life? It is one simple statement. As you and I are called to mirror this love of Christ into the world personally, what does it look like? The redemptive love of God’s people for one another is intentionally sacrificial and joyfully anticipatory as well as personally responsive. God’s people almost always get “A’s” in the moment of crisis to respond. Let’s take it to another level. Not only do we respond to when people need love that’s appropriate but we joyfully, thoughtfully and anticipate how to show that love so that they aren’t facing those situations. We are also proactive in our love as well as reactive in our love.

To do this we have to be prioritized. We have to prioritize the love of one another. We are not to prioritize the love of one another to the exclusion of our enemies but from the foundation of loving one another and then together we reach out to those who have enmity against God or those who have enmity against us but we prioritize it. Jesus said, “By your love with one another these people whom you go love will know that you are My disciples by that love that you have for one another.”

The second thing is that not only must this love be prioritized but it’s teaching us that we need to have some margins in our life. For instance, I get a missionary letter that says “We need such and such” and we think “Boy I really want to help” but then we realize there’s a lot of month left at the end of the money. We have to live with margins in our life. To love people costs time, resources and emotional physical energy. It’s like a book. A book is not inviting if it runs from end to end. Books are inviting when you

have the margins. You and I need margins in our life. In other words, we need the fruit of the Spirit which is self control. We need margins of time, margins of finance and margins of emotional energy so that we are not so strung out that we don't have the emotional or physical energy to respond to a situation. So we need to prioritize and have margins.

Thirdly, we need perspective. Here is just one perspective. Do you know why it's easy for Christians to sell things and give things away? It's because we don't own anything. It's the blessedness of possessing nothing. God, would You please give me the perspective that I don't own a single thing. They call me a homeowner but I'm not a homeowner for God has entrusted this home to me for me as a steward to use for You. So these bedrooms don't belong to me they belong to You. How do you want to use them Lord? My bank account doesn't belong to me it belongs to You. All of what I have belongs to You. Now, Lord from Your Word, led by Your Spirit, how am I to use this? The first perspective is Jesus bought me. I am His and He is mine. What He has entrusted to me I want to be a good steward with but I don't want to own anything for He owns it all. Now Lord where do You want me to use it? How do You want me to use it?

I use it with my margins and priorities in place. Where do I start with priorities? Here is a good start. Start wherever you have taken a vow before God. Did you take a marriage vow? That is a priority. Did you take a baptismal vow for your children? That's a priority. Did you take a membership vow in the church of Jesus Christ? That's a priority. Did you take a vow when you signed on for that employment? That's a priority. We prioritize where we have signed our name in the name of Christ before a watching world and with that perspective of I don't own anything.

Now comes commitment and that's a tough one in our society today. Do we make a commitment or not? A man said to me the other day "I ask for an RSVP and nobody writes back? People just don't have manners." I said, "I don't think that's the case. I think they don't write back because they want to keep their options open." Another man said to me "Pastor you can put that on your calendar as a definite maybe." We're always keeping our options open without commitment but you can't love without commitment. It can't be done.

The final thing is "O Lord, would You give me a life of prayer? Lead me in my priorities, lead me to my margins, lead me to people and help me to see where they really are and what they really need. Lead me to my commitments that I make them pointedly, thoughtfully and completely in and for Christ. Lead me." This is a big deal. This is our love for one another and it's a big deal. This is how the world knows that what we say is true. "You're My disciples."

I had thought about some illustrations to give you in closing but I've decided not to because there are so many that you would be overwhelmed. This is a great privilege for me to preach on something that I think you are marvelous at but just like Paul said "Let your love excel still more." Let's just build on it. So I will use one illustration from Charlotte, North Carolina. A couple moved to our church, came to the pastor's class, joined our church and they didn't have any family or friends or relatives in Charlotte. Long story short, he called one night of our elders who led his small group and said "We're going to have to miss tonight because I have to get my wife to the hospital who seems to be seriously ill. We don't know anybody yet and have only been at the church

for a month but I didn't know anyone else to call but ya'll. Can somebody keep my two kids so I can take my wife to the hospital?" The elder said, "Absolutely."

Two families arrived within ten minutes. Then he went to the emergency and left the room to take his wife to a hospital room and there were sixteen people in that room singing hymns waiting for them, then enveloped them and prayed with them. This is the love of the brethren. Love one another with commitments, thoughtfully, responsive, anticipatory. It's no accident that man's wife is now the director of women's ministry at Christ Covenant. It's no accident that her brother who walked away from the faith came and talked to us and committed his life to Christ because of what he saw happen in his sister's life. The world will know that you're My disciples. That's the love that God has called us to give to one another and it's all based upon the love of Christ. This isn't what we do to get Jesus to love us. This is what we do because Jesus has loved us and loving the way Jesus loves. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together. Thank You for our beautiful Savior. I pray that You would bless this congregation and from this congregation with brothers and sisters and churches all over this area and around the world that we might reach the world and they might see the love that is Divine from the Lord, unto the Lord, and to all that are around us beginning with one another. Father, I thank You for this great privilege to love one another, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

The Briarwood Mission

"Our Purpose"

For God's glory, Briarwood is committed to **EQUIPPING CHRISTIANS** to worship God and reach Birmingham to reach the world for Christ.

The Briarwood Vision

"Our Passion"

For Coming Generations, Briarwood desires to be a Christ-centered, Gospel-driven, Spirit-filled **EQUIPPING CENTER** where every member is a minister and a missionary.

The Briarwood Strategy

"Our Ministry"

For Coming Generations, Briarwood will prayerfully seek to Implement the Biblical strategy of:

1. Gospel Evangelism and Disciple-making
2. Gospel Church Planting and Church Revitalization
3. Gospel Deeds of Love, Mercy and Justice
4. Gospel Leaders Developed and Deployed