

LOVE

In 1918, when Woodrow Wilson was President of the United States, he often travelled across the country by train. He would usually be in the last coach, and when the train came into a town he would come out onto the deck at the back and greet people. One day he was going through Billings, Montana. He went out to greet the people and a crowd came to see him. Two little brothers elbowed their way through the crowd and got right up close. One little boy had an American flag that he was waving. In an act of love, he gave it to the President. The President took that flag and the little boy was so happy. The other brother stood there upset because he had had nothing to give to the President. He thought about it for a moment, then he found a dime in his pocket. He took it out and handed it to the President. Woodrow Wilson reached down and took that dime and thanked the little boy.

A year after that Woodrow Wilson had a stroke. He retired from office in 1921 and died a few years later. After his death, his wife was going through his personal effects and she found his wallet. When she opened it up she found that dime, carefully wrapped up in a piece of paper. It was so meaningful that the President had carried that dime with him since that day, everywhere he went. It was a reminder of the day in Billings Montana when a young boy reached out in love and gave him what he had. Likewise, when we reach out in love it touches God's heart.

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? It means loving God and loving others.

Mat 22:35-40 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? 37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

We are continuing with our series this morning called Authentic Faith. We have looked at the importance of Lordship, Repentance and Bearing Fruit. Today we are looking at another mark of what it is to be a follower of Jesus. It is love. Authentic faith means loving God and loving others.

John 13:34-35 A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

How do you know if you have authentic faith? Do you love others? Jesus said that this was the way that people would be able to tell us apart. This was an identifying feature that would be present in those who were His disciples. By THIS He said, we would be identified.

The message today is very simple to hear and even comprehend; but it is difficult to live. It is one thing to 'say' we love one another, but it is another thing entirely, to actually demonstrate love or practice it.

This morning I want to say 4 things about this verse we have just read;

1. We are Commanded to Love

Jesus starts by saying to His disciples "A new COMMAND I give you..." He did not say a new suggestion. Do this if you get around to it. It is a command. It is non-negotiable.

If you are in the army and your commanding officer says march, that command is not up for debate. That does not mean that you sit around considering and debating the options of whether to march or not. When he says march you march, and keep on marching until he says stop. If he says jump you say "how high." Jesus commanded us to love one another. It is not a suggestion. It is not open for debate.

I heard the story of an older couple that was out driving. The husband came to a stop sign and slowed down but did not stop. The wife asked him "Why didn't you stop?" The husband said, "I slowed down, that is good enough!" The next day they were out driving and the same thing happened. The husband came to a stop sign and slowed down but did not stop. The wife again asked him "Why didn't you stop?" The husband said, "I slowed down, that is good enough!" A few days later they were out driving again. The husband came to a stop sign and slowed down but did not stop. This time the wife grabbed her purse and started beating her husband on the head with it. She said, "Since you are finding it difficult to understand the difference between stop and slow down, I am, hitting you with my purse very fast. Now do you want me to slow down or do you want me to stop?"

We live in a society today where people do not like to be told what to do. If you tell a person to do something the immediate reply is "Don't tell me what to do, I can decide on my own." This goes back to the first sermon in this series on Lordship. Who is calling the shots in your life?

1Jn 4:7-12 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

How do you know if you have authentic faith? Here is the test; do you love others? Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is the litmus test. Jesus commands us to love because that is what believers do. That is the fruit of the spirit. It is like commanding apple trees to produce apples.

Jesus calls this a new command because it goes against our old nature. It is different. Our basic instinct is to love only people who love us.

Mat 5:43-48 You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Watchman Nee, a Chinese evangelist, tells of a Christian he once knew in China. He was a rice farmer, and his fields lay high on a mountain. Every day he pumped water into the paddies of new rice. And every morning he returned to find that an unbelieving neighbor who lived down the hill had opened the dikes surrounding the Christian's field to let the water fill his own. For a while the Christian ignored the injustice, but at last he became desperate. What should he do? His own rice would die if this continued. How long could it go on?

The Christians met, prayed, and came up with this solution. The next day the Christian farmer rose early in the morning and first filled his neighbor's fields; then he attended to his own. Watchman Nee tells how the neighbor became a Christian, his unbelief overcome by a genuine demonstration of a Christian's love for others

2. We are Challenged by this Love

Jesus goes on to say what the new command He is giving is. It is to "love one another as I have loved you." Notice that He is not only telling us simply WHAT to do but also HOW to do it. That we do not just love one another based upon our own definition of what love is or by our own standards. We are told to love one another AS JESUS LOVED US. It is a challenge. Jesus is saying "you see the way I have loved you? Do that!" That is our standard. You go to an amusement park and there is a sign that says you must be THIS tall to ride this ride. Jesus says you must be THIS loving to be my disciple. We follow His example.

So the question we really need to ask is this, "how does Jesus love us?" The answer is that Jesus loves us completely. He loves us sacrificially. His love is not based on what we have done, it is based on who we are as people created in the image of God.

Jesus loved us enough to give himself completely for us. I know that it is difficult for us as finite creatures to truly understand it. That is why Paul prayed that the Christians in Ephesus would be given supernatural insight through the Holy Spirit to truly understand God's love for us.;

Eph 3:16-19 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge -- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

The almighty eternal God of creation loved you enough to become a created thing. The second person of the Trinity left heaven to be born a helpless baby in a stable in an obscure village to a poor family. He did this so that he could come and show us truth. He was rejected, tortured and killed for us. He came to pay for our debt, to die in our place.

John 15:12-13 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

We are to love each other AS Jesus loved us. This is AGAPE love. To give ourselves and sacrifice for others. There are 3 types of love that we see in this world today. There is the IF love which says, "IF you do what I like or IF you do what I want or IF you will say what I want you to say, then I will love you." You see this so often. Then there is the BECAUSE OF love. It says, "BECAUSE you are physically attractive, or BECAUSE you have a lot of money or BECAUSE I like you then I will love you. These two are forms of self-love. They are a poor imitation of the real thing. Both of these types of love are conditional and often change because the conditions they are based on change.

God's love is the IN SPITE OF type of love. It is not based on what we do, but in spite of what we do. It is based on who we are.

This verse continues;

John 15:14 You are my friends if you do what I command.

Jesus is not saying that if you do not do what I tell you to do I will not love you anymore. He is saying (again) that the way to know if you are a follower of mine is whether you obey my command to love unconditionally and sacrificially.

I heard the story of a guy who took his son and daughter to the mall. While they were shopping, they noticed that the mall had set up a petting zoo. The kids immediately started begging their dad to go. He needed to get what he came for, so he handed his kids a dollar each and told them to go and that he would join them as soon as he had bought what he came for. The kids took off towards the petting zoo.

About 20 minutes later, he got to the petting zoo area and noticed that his daughter was sitting outside the petting zoo area looking in. He asked her why she was not in with the animals and she said that it cost \$2 to get in, so she had given her brother her money. Their family had a motto that they had often heard the father repeat, "love is action." He father and daughter stood there by the fence watching the brother go crazy petting and feeding the animals. The daughter stood with her hands and her chin resting on the fence just watching. The father knew he had another \$2, it was burning a hole in his pocket. However, he never offered it, and she never asked for it. He allowed her to make the sacrifice of love for her brother. She was following through with the truth that "love is action."

Love is not just action, it is sacrificial action. It is not conditional. It always pays a price. Love always costs us something. It is expensive. It is expressed through giving, not taking. Its focus is on others, not on self.

3. We are Confirmed by our Love

Jesus went on to say "by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." This is how you know who is who. This is the proof. This is the fruit. We read last week;

Gal 5:22-23 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control...

The fruit of the Spirit begins with love ... love is the first thing, the first in that precious cluster of fruit. Someone has said that all other eight can be put in terms of love. Joy is love exulting; peace is love in repose; long-suffering is love on trial; gentleness is love in society; goodness is love in action; faith is love on the battlefield; meekness is love at school; and temperance is love in training. So it is love all the way; love at the top, love at the bottom, and all the way along down this list of graces – DL Moody

You want to know what authentic faith looks like? It is love. Think about it: this is what JESUS said makes us different from the world.

Maybe you are sitting there at this point and thinking to yourself "I think I am a loving person." Before we pat ourselves on the back and tell ourselves that we have arrived, we need to examine our own hearts. Hasn't there been a time when our love was conditional? Times when you gossiped about someone or were unkind to someone because you were hurt? Times we spoke in anger and were not the loving example of grace that Jesus expects us to be?

Are we truly loving AS Jesus loved us? Are we examples of His grace? Do people see us and see that there is something different about us? Have we been changed? Paul reminded the Church in Corinth what authentic love was supposed to look like;

1Co 13:4-7 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love is not selfish. It is not unforgiving. It is patient and kind. It is giving.

Chuck Swindoll told the story of an old friend that was in the Marine Corps. This guy cursed loudly, fought hard, chased women, drank heavily, loved war and weapons, and hated church. One day another friend invited him to church and he came to Christ. His life was transformed.

Years later Chuck Swindoll ran into his friend and the two of them sat down to talk. He was so different than the person he had been before, but as they spoke the ex marine said this to him, "You know, Chuck, the only thing I still miss is that old fellowship I used to have with all the guys down at the tavern. I remember how we used to sit around and let our hair down. I can't find anything like that for Christians. I no longer have a place to admit my faults and talk about my battles -- where somebody won't preach at me and frown at me and quote me a verse."

He said in that sermon these words;

"The neighborhood bar is possibly the best counterfeit that there is to the fellowship Christ wants us to give his church. It's an imitation, dispensing liquor instead of grace, escape rather than reality - but it is a permissive, accepting and inclusive fellowship. It is unshockable. It is democratic. You can tell people secrets, and they usually don't tell others or even want to. The bar flourishes not because most people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, and so many seek a counterfeit at the price of a few beers."

He concluded by saying, "I believe that Christ wants his church to be unshockable, a fellowship where people can come in and say, 'I'm sunk, I'm beat, I've had it.' Alcoholics Anonymous has this quality -- our churches too often miss it."

You know the song; Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got. Taking a break from all your worries, sure would help a lot. Wouldn't you like to get away? Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came. You wanna be where you can see, our troubles are all the same, you wanna be where everybody knows Your name.

4. We are Changed by HIS Love

1Jn 3:1 How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

God only expects us to give what we have first received. It is only when you receive His gift of love that you can share His gift of love.

I heard the story about a pastor who served in a church. There were several members of that church who owned flower shops, and they took turns bringing in flowers to place at the front of the church as well as a lapel flower for the pastor to wear on Sundays. After time, the pastor just took the flowers for granted. One day after church a young boy walked up to him and said, "Sir, what are you going to do with your flower?" At first the preacher didn't know what the boy was talking about. When it sank in, he pointed to the rose on his lapel and asked the boy, "Do you mean this?" The boy said, "Yes, sir. If you're just going to throw it away, I would like it." The preacher smiled and told him he could have the flower and then casually asked what he was going to do with it.

The boy, looked up at the pastor and said, "Sir, I'm going to give it to my grandmother. She has been very sick and there is nothing that we can do. She has been so good to me. She cooks for me and takes care of me. I wanted to give her that pretty flower for loving me."

The boy's words touched the pastor's heart. He took the boy up to the front of the church and told him "Yes, you can have my little flower, and you see this big bouquet of flowers? You can take them to your Grandma as well. She deserves the best. I hope she likes them."

Tears welled up in the boy's eyes. He could hardly speak. Finally he said, "What a wonderful day! I only asked for one flower but got a beautiful bouquet."

That is really my story. I don't mean the flowers, I mean I understand what that boy felt like. When I heard the good news of Jesus love and forgiveness I came asking for it. But what I have experienced is so much more than I could have ever asked or even imagined. God has been so good to me. His love is so very precious to me. How can you not be changed by that? In light of everything we have been given, how can we not be different?