

Love

[John 13:1-35](#)

Discipleship Essentials - Part Three: Becoming Like Christ

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

There is an intimate connection in the Gospel of John, as the Choir has just called our attention to, between the coming of the Holy Spirit and Jesus' call for us to keep the commandment of loving one another. And so now hear the word from the Spirit in John 13-15 – some excerpts of verses.

Now before the festival of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own that were in the world, he loved them to the end. Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. After he had washed their feet, he put on his robe and returned to the table and he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me teacher and Lord and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet, for I have set you an example that you should do as I have done to you. I give you a new commandment: that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another. If you love me you will keep my commandment. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

The word of the Lord. Let us pray. O, Lord Jesus Christ, on this day of Pentecost, where we recognize our need for your powerful Holy Spirit, we ask now that that Spirit would come to us as one of peace and one of teaching—that we might learn to keep your commandment of love. As we listen to that word, may you move us to acts of sacrificial life together. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Love is a word that is thrown around a lot in our culture. Because of that, there is great ambivalence as to what love in the New Testament really means. It is my sense that those who read the New Testament, those letters and gospels, did not misunderstand it; because being close to Jesus, they saw Jesus very carefully modeling the pattern of love—and ultimately demonstrating the ultimate pattern of love in giving his life for us. The kind of love that is described here in the Gospel of John, and is lived out in Jesus' life, is a generous move by Jesus for the sake of others. It is an intentional decision to give another what they cannot give to themselves. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that who so ever might believe in him might not perish, but have everlasting life."

Love is to honor another human being more than I honor myself. It is to treat another with respect who has been treated poorly by other human beings. It is to favor someone who has not been favored in their previous life patterns. It is to serve someone, or to stoop down before them and lift them up to a higher status than we might have. It is to sacrifice ourselves for the other person. It is a decision of intention that is rational and planned: to do something for the other person that will benefit them. That is New Testament love displayed in Jesus Christ.

The actual root word, *agape*, is probably from the words that mean "goodness" and "feast." Love is a big feast; a banquet of doing good for other people. Jesus told the parable of the great banquet and how those who had been called had not come; but instead, he invited people who were not going to be a part of the party: the homeless, the oppressed, the poor, those who were on the streets. Jesus invites them into the great banquet. We can see that love in the New Testament is a hard thing to do.

In Gary Chapman's well-known book, *The Five Love Languages*, he says this about love:

It requires effort and discipline; it is the choice to expend energy in an effort to benefit that other person. And for couples, this love cannot begin until being in love has run its course.

One of his themes is that, as long as you're obsessed with the other person, with all of the emotions and thoughtfulness of, "I need to have them or I'll die," when all of that burns out, we finally get the epitome of love: and that is my willingness to die for them. Love is a choice to act. Chapman identifies five love languages that give us clear demonstrations of those choices: giving words of affirmation; setting aside time to be in face-to-face conversations so that we can focus together; receiving gifts that are given from one to another; giving acts of service; and providing physical affection and touch.

One of the images that will never leave my mind until I die is the image of my mother standing all day and doing all sorts of things for us kids growing up; to the point, often, that her feet would be very sore. She would sit down at night, and my father would come home exhausted, and she would say the famous words, "John, would you please rub my feet." My dad, in his exhausted state, with his hands that had been working all day in machinery (I'm sure sore), would take the time to rub my mother's feet. That was a clear, clear statement to me that my dad, in his tiredness, would be willing to invest in my mom, the gift of touch.

My daughter, Tamara, picked up the hunger of that from my mother, I think. She will often say to me when she's visiting, "Dad, can you rub my feet?" And I'm often thinking to myself, "There are other things I would rather do. But not at this moment; it's time to rub my daughter's feet." My wife has a different love language. While she would appreciate the foot rub, she would prefer me cleaning the kitchen and doing the dishes. As she said to me recently after I did that, "that screams love to me." Have you ever had

the spouse in your life scream love to you?

This text gives us a wonderful metaphor of love that wraps all of this together. It's when Jesus wraps a towel around himself and kneels at the disciples' feet and systematically washes each one of their feet. And do you know who was there? In the same text, John makes it very clear that Judas has decided to betray Jesus; and Jesus still washes his feet. Jesus is willing to do that, as a servant—even to the person who is ready to betray him and do evil to him.

Jesus says to the disciples: you may not understand fully what I'm doing, but later you'll get it. I, your teacher, your Lord, have washed your feet; you ought also to wash one another's feet. Some churches practice that as a sacrament, like the Lord's Supper, because they consider it so important: if Jesus did it, let's do it for each other. I did think, for a moment, about the possibility of having a foot washing here on Pentecost Sunday; but then decided it was a probably a bridge too far. We probably need to let you know in advance. However, that doesn't change the power of the metaphor. And that is, that we are called to demonstrate love; and that means that we are willing to serve one another in menial tasks. We are willing to stoop to lift another person up.

There is method to Jesus' pattern of discipleship. The method is that the disciples should learn to keep his commandments and to practice them; to put into action what he has demonstrated to them—that they should wash one another's feet; that they should love one another as he has loved them. And so this text calls us to realize that the invitation to love is to put love into practice; to make it happen; to model the commands; to do the commands of Jesus. And what are the commands of Jesus? Literally, everything he did and said—all wrapped up into a set of wonderful example commands that we are to learn and practice.

But we are not left alone in it. It is not as though we can do this on our own ability. Jesus is clear in this text that he will give the disciples a kind of muse—the Holy Spirit—to teach them how to do this. The Holy Spirit—who would help them to think carefully, deeply, and thoughtfully about how to put love into action; how to think creatively, and even poetically and symbolically, about how to put love into action. The Holy Spirit is in your life to give you the wisdom and courage to wash one another's feet. The role of the Holy Spirit is to come alongside each of us as the paraclete—the one who comes alongside to become our advocate, our counselor, our helper, to teach us what Jesus has taught us, to make us part of one family—that we, as a family, would care for each other; to put the teachings of Jesus into action; to put the symbol into practice; and, most of all, help us tell the truth. Repeated twice in this text is that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth. If the Holy Spirit is in your life, that constant voice is whispering in your ear to tell the truth. As the apostle said, love is always connected to the truth: speak the truth in love. For the truth without love is a dangerous thing. But when the truth is spoken in love, it is a redemptive reality. It is hard to tell the truth, particularly to people who don't want to hear the truth. One must spend a lot of time in prayer and reflection in order to come to the place where you know exactly how to say the truth at the right time.

But love is not left just to the practice of the commandments and the power of the Spirit; love is taken to the final degree in Jesus' life. And that final degree is the statement of the magnificence, the majesty, and the nobility of Jesus—and the nobility of love, in this statement: there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one another—friends... or even one's enemies. When Jesus was totally humbled and humiliated, then he was exalted. He loved them to the end, John says, to the full extent. He poured out every ounce of love in him and said on the cross, "It is finished." Philippians 2 puts it this way:

Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited; but he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God highly exalted him.

The majesty of Jesus is most clearly seen in his humbling moment of death on the cross. And it is an invitation to us to follow him there—which is a hard place to go.

One of the impacts of love is that, when people see how we love each other, in the context of following Jesus, the mission impact is great—because they will recognize, in those practices of love, that Jesus Christ is present among us. The acts of service that we show to each other and to others reveal Jesus in our midst. If you want to make disciples... parents, if you want to have your children follow Jesus when they reach an age of responsibility to make that decision... then one of the clearest ways that that happens is not getting them to Sunday school; not getting them religion or morality; it is doing what Jesus says between a husband and wife. And that is, to love one another as Christ loves you. A mom and dad who love each other is a living example to our children and their children of Jesus Christ. But what a great disconnect to say, "I love you, but I'm leaving your mom... I love you, but I'm leaving your dad." The core of faith is the faithfulness of parents who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, love each other to the end.

It is not just in marriage that that happens, but in all aspects of life. This weekend we remember those who are in other parts of the world, in harm's way, and the chaplains who care for them. Newsweek just had an article on chaplains in the May 7th issue: reflections on an Army Chaplain, Roger Benimoff. He would pray, at the being of his time as a chaplain, for God to surround the troops with loving protection. But then he would see so much destruction and carnage that he gave up on God's love as protection. He began to understand that people die; that chaos and confusion reign; and that terrorism happens. And he ends up being present to hurting soldiers; facing battlefield stress; counseling the grieving; making sense of the senseless. Responsible for 1,100 soldiers as their pastor and chaplain, confronting the loss of their faith—and his own faith—in extreme doubt, he says his favorite verse, in all of that, is Isaiah 54:10, "Though the mountains shake and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you [God says] will not be shaken. My covenant of peace shall not be removed." Benimoff is holding onto that in the midst of his own crisis of faith, because he does not see evidence of God's love in the carnage. There is no greater love than for one to lay down one's life for another—even to be willing to go onto the battlefield and lose the very faith in a loving God that took you there. It is a great act of love to be willing to give up one's faith, to put love into action. Think about that—that is a hard lesson. That is a part of the great journey of faith God takes us on—that we cannot produce faith on our own agenda. But the love of God will sustain us and not separate us, even in the face of death and suffering. As we have often heard in the letter of Romans, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ—not hardship, not stress, not persecution, or peril of the sword—nothing is able to separate us from the love of God. When we've lost our love for God and for one another, God has not lost his love for us. And that's what will sustain us when we're in the darkest

place.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, may you give us the freedom to love one another as you have loved us. But even so, may your love sustain us when we have lost our ability to love. We pray this in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.