



SERMON TITLE: "What Is Love?"

DATE: September 6, 2020

SCRIPTURE: John 13:31-35

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"These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31). This is how John concludes his biography of Jesus. He wanted the young, the old, the sick, the well, the despairing, the hopeful, the skeptics, the faithful, and whoever reads his account of Jesus to believe and trust him more fully. But what did John want them to believe? He wanted them to believe that Jesus alone brought eternal life into the present, broken world. And for all who enter this eternal life with God right now, we—like John—are exiles. For all who enter a relationship with Jesus, we will very likely be marginalized and dismissed because we follow him. So, what does it mean to believe? And how do we mature in believing? What does it mean to remain faithful to God when the pressure is on? These are the things that John will help us explore by showing us the glory and beauty of Jesus.

David passed his journal and pen around the night club. He wrote a question that he wanted everybody to answer, "What is love?" And if you read the rest of David's story, you'll know that this is what he had pursued his whole life. This wasn't a random question. This is what he had been grappling with for years – what is true, lasting love, and connection?

After it circulated for a few hours, and he got dozens of responses, David finally sat down to read all the responses. He got some superficial ones and playful ones. He got some explicit ones and some deeply jaded ones. A few people tried to wax poetic and quote Plato or other philosophers. But in all that David read, no answer satisfied in any meaningful way. Rather, David said, "Those pages showed me an empty abyss. Maybe, I thought, in the end, we're all just slaves to our biological impulses. Maybe love is just a game of illusions in a reality of pitiless indifference." But David couldn't stop there. There had to be more. He continues, "The war to find love still raged within me. I knew that there had to be a higher love that corresponded to my desire for intimacy. And leaving the club that night, the façade began to crack."

We're all like David. We're all on a hunt like this – to find a love that makes sense of things. To find a love that includes intimacy, connection, purpose, and belonging beyond just a good time. And this pursuit is not a passive thing. It's like a war. There are so many different definitions of love battling for our attention and our affections. It's a competition. Which version of love will we go with?

If you're a follower of Jesus, we're often tempted to simply acknowledge that God's love in Jesus is the way to live, but then practically, we sometimes opt for a culturally-contingent view of love that is just a façade soon to crack. And this means that we need to ask David's question alongside him, "What is love?" And beyond this, "What does love do?"

What Jesus tells his friends in the Upper Room the night he was arrested helps us answer our question. Jesus told his friends, "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" (13.34-35). And the first striking thing about this statement is that there is a very real way in which this is not a new commandment. So, where is the newness in Jesus' command to love?

Well, this command is new because Jesus is instituting a new *era* of love. Jesus is inaugurating God's kingdom right here and right now. He's bringing heaven to earth, and previously God's law was written on stone, but now he's writing his law on peoples' hearts. Never before has the Christ come, bringing God's loving and rescuing reign from the future backwards into the past, but that's what Jesus is doing. But it's also a new *depth* of love. They had never seen love like this before. Jesus has just washed their feet, and he even washed the feet of his betrayer! And this kind of love almost seems wasteful and unheard of! This is a love that is never not bursting at the seams. Think about it; what kind of king serves the servants? But most importantly, this is a new *motive* of love. "Love one another JUST AS I have loved you." The foot-washing was a symbolic shadow of how Jesus came to eternally make people clean through the cross. We are dirtied up with the filth of our own sin and selfishness and messiness of the world, but Jesus came to make us clean by going to the cross in our place. And so, the newness here is ultimately a new *motive*, a gospel motive to love one another.

Furthermore, there's always an object to love. Jesus is saying that our love should be directed towards people. Love always has a place that it lands. And guess what that means? That means that love is not primarily us feeling loved. That's not love. Love is not about what is gained by the one doing the loving. When you love someone, it's not about the amount of ease, comfort, control, and/or kickback involved with the loving. When Jesus says "love one another," there's not a subliminal "only if you have enough time," or "as long as you already like them," or "as long as it doesn't exhaust you or make your life messy." No. This kind of love is audaciously others-centered. And this train of thought leads to the first part of our answer...

Love is the divine disposition towards others that seeks their highest good, even at great personal cost.

When you love people like Jesus loved you, you won't get bogged down in whether or not it's costing you something, because you'll be motivated by the gracious love of Jesus, and not by feeling like you have to work your way into his favor. This is what love is; it's God's posture, in the gospel of Jesus, to embrace his people for their good. So we have to ask ourselves, How do I do with that? Am I more out for the good of others, or for my own good? Do I assess my relationships based primarily on what I can get out of them? Would I rather understand people or be understood by people? But secondly...

Love gives of itself to serve and care for others.

This serving love can be massive and sacrificial and powerful and beautiful; think of the cross. But also think of the towel; it can be simple and practical and small and thoughtful. All of it can be under the umbrella of love giving itself in the service of others. And Christians have often failed big time here. N. T. Wright comments, "We are bound to cringe with shame at the way in which professing Christians have treated each other down the years. We have turned the gospel into a weapon. We have hit each other over the head with it. We have burned each other at the stake with it. And we have defined the 'one another' so tightly that it means 'only love the people who reinforce your own sense of who you are.'" This love Jesus is inviting us to never includes thinking that you're better than the people you're called to love. Rather, like Jesus himself, this love always includes giving your life away for others to know God and be a part of his family. "By this love, the world will know that you are my disciples."

And climactically, John wants us to see John 13 in light of everything he writes, and when we do so, we will see that Jesus' ultimate act of love is the cross. And beyond John's gospel, the New Testament repeats this theme time and time again, "To the one who has loved us and freed us from our sins *by his blood*, to him be glory forever" (Revelation 1). So...

Everything that love is and does must be rooted in God's love for us in the cross of Jesus.

This is where David's question finds its ultimate satisfaction in the cross and gospel of Jesus. It's here that love forgives. Love liberates. Love cleanses. Love empowers. Love sympathizes. Love serves. And only here can we find lasting love. How so? Because death couldn't hold Jesus down. His love is stronger than death. Love lives. And here's the fun and scary part: Jesus intends for his life and his love to live on in us. That is John 13.

It's possible for us to know what love is and what it does. It's possible to love each other, to serve each other, to go out of our way to provide for each other. We're called to care for, defend, help, and encourage one another. We're called to enjoy one another. We're called to all of this so that the watching world might see God's love spill out of our sacrificial bond of love. And this is possible as we look to Jesus on the cross. This is only possible when He is our standard, our definition, and the goal of our love. A new commandment he gives us that we love one another just as he has loved us, by laying down his life for us.

Discussion Starters

- Personally, what stood out to you the most in this passage/message?
- What is new about the "new commandment" Jesus gives?
- When do you most feel "a war of loves" in your heart or in your experience?
- Who is someone you know who loves other followers of Jesus like this?
- When is it hard for you to extend love like this?
- How is the cross of Jesus our ultimate motive, paradigm, and example of loving one another?